

BRIEFING NOTE

EXPERIENCES OF FEMALE TRADITIONAL LEADERS IN ZIMBABWE: AN INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS



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About TechVillage

TechVillage innovation hub was founded in 2016 in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe with a mandate to help entrepreneurs transform their ideas into sustainable businesses and, in the process, enable corporates and other ecosystem partners to leverage innovation and entrepreneurship to meet their organisational goals. TechVillage operates at the nexus of social impact, research, innovation, business and governance. It strives to create a platform where large businesses, academia, government agencies, non-profits, start-ups and innovators interact and collaborate to drive progress. TechVillage also provides working space, runs training and educational programmes, hosts collaboration and networking events and innovation programmes. As a research-oriented organisation, TechVillage undertakes extensive applied research on a variety of cross-cutting societal issues.

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Key findings

- Traditional leadership roles, including chiefdoms, have been reserved for men in most parts of Zimbabwe, and power-sharing between men and women remains controversial.
- Traditional gender roles, social norms and cultural barriers reinforce hegemonic masculinities in traditional leadership: women can wield 'silent' influence, but are seen as transgressing gender norms when they become traditional leaders, and may face opposition from their families, communities and other chiefs.
- Women traditional leaders are marginalized and undermined in their political roles as a result of gender norms that intersect with other factors such as their age and marital status. If they are young or old, there are doubts about their ability to lead, while age is not seen as an issue for male leaders. Unmarried women, less educated women or women whose appearance challenges the norm are disrespected, harassed and ignored.
- More institutions should create dedicated platforms, functions and roles for female traditional leaders as a way to tackle discriminatory gender norms. The Ministry of Women Affairs, for example, could establish a dedicated section for work to amend the Traditional Leaders Act so that some of the dedicated senators' seats for chiefs are reserved for women in that role.

Key terms

Chiefs (Induna(kazi)/Mambo): A chief in Zimbabwe is an unelected (usually male) leader in rural communities whose rise to power is hereditary. Chiefs are appointed by the President after consultation with the family and relevant parties.

Doro remusoro: Beer brewed for the rainmaking ceremony.

Headman (Umlisa/Sadunhu): An unelected communal leader selected by the chief and his/her family members who is part of the chiefs' advisory council. The headman assists the chief in carrying out their duties.

Intersectionality: A concept developed by Crenshaw (1989) in the 1980s highlighted how the experiences of Black African American women are interconnected with various identities and systems of oppression and cannot be explained through gender and race alone. The concept highlights that an individual's experiences or forms of oppression cannot be addressed in isolation. In fact, intersectionality emphasises the need to understand and address how different forms of discrimination and privilege overlap to shape an individual's experiences and opportunities.

Mthwakazi: A traditional name for the proto-Ndebele people and Ndebele kingdom.

Primogeniture: Succession by a first born, particularly a first-born son.

Village heads (uSobhuku/Sabhuku): Village heads are the lowest officials in the structure of traditional leadership in Zimbabwe. They are selected by the headman. Village heads are the closest leaders to their communities and interact more often with community members. They are, therefore, responsible for forwarding any community concerns to the headman and then to the chief.

Introduction and background

Zimbabwe is a patriarchal society where many women are subdued by men who continue to dominate positions of power, leadership and decision making (Chuma and Ncube, 2010). Since 1980, when Zimbabwe gained its independence, the participation and representation of women in politics has been very low compared to their male counterparts, even though women make up more of the population (Mpofu, 2016). In recent years the number of seats held by women has fluctuated and now stands at 31% in the Parliament and 45% in the Senate in 2023 (IPU, 2023) This marginalisation and underrepresentation of women means that governance in Zimbabwe is not yet democratic.

While the participation of women has been hindered by gendered socio-cultural and religious beliefs, Zimbabwe is making efforts to curb gender-based discrimination by enacting laws and policies that uphold women's equal rights. In 2013, for example, the Constitution of Zimbabwe increased the number of seats in Parliament reserved for women from 16% to 34% (Hamandishe, 2018). Yet, as the above-mentioned election results demonstrate, these constitutional provisions have not been followed.

In addition, Zimbabwe has adopted regional and international conventions that support equality, such as the *Maputo Protocol*, which guarantees rights to women to equal participation in all domains, and the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women* (CEDAW). Sections 17c, 80 and 50 of the Constitution provide guidelines for upholding the rights of women and ensuring equal access to resources.

Meanwhile, women in Zimbabwe have been ascending to positions that were once reserved for men. In 2004, for example, Joyce Mujuru was appointed as the country's first female Vice President, and in 2019 Oppah Muchinguri became the first female Minister of Defence. While such positive developments on the inclusion and representation of women in politics are welcome, the passing of laws and the successes of individual women relate mostly to elected politicians, rather than traditional leaders.

Traditional leaders are unelected rural leaders who come to power through succession. Culturally, this succession is passed down through male lines, although some women have also risen to traditional leadership positions in cases where there are no male children to take up the role. In 1996, for example, Zimbabwe saw the appointment of the first *Indunakazi* (female chief) *Mabhena* among the Nguni people. However, women traditional leaders and women in rural areas remain underrepresented in local and national governance structures and political spaces. According to the 2021 Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) Gender Protocol Barometer, Zimbabwe had only six female chiefs and 15 female headmen¹ out of 272 chiefs and 452 headmen respectively (SADC, 2021).

Women traditional leaders are entirely absent from the national Senate, where 10 seats are reserved for traditional chiefs. These chiefs are nominated by the National Council of Chiefs, an assembly of all traditional leaders in Zimbabwe. The council represents all traditional leaders and is headed by the President of Chiefs and Deputy President who are usually elected to power for five years. Since independence, no female traditional leader has ever been selected for a seat in the Senate.

Our research examines the experiences of Zimbabwe's female traditional leaders. This study is both extremely timely and much-needed, as researchers have historically overlooked their presence, thereby reinforcing their invisibility in politics. Most studies have focused on female parliamentarians in relation to the theme of 'women in governance', with an emphasis on the universalisation of women in governance through parliamentary participation that neglects women in rural areas (Dodo, 2013). As a result, the plight of women in relation to rural governance is poorly represented by women at the

¹ The term 'headman' is used, even if the position is occupied by a woman, because the institution is male-oriented and has historically been reserved for men. This is evident even in the Traditional Leaders Act where there is no mention of a 'woman' or a 'she'.

level of national governance. The study has also been spurred by elections for the National Council of Chiefs in 2023, as it is important to examine the status and position of women in these elections and in Zimbabwe's institutions more generally.

Traditional leadership in Zimbabwe

'We are viewed as weaklings who can't lead.'

Female chief

Traditional leadership in Zimbabwe is not homogenous. It differs among ethnic groups, resulting in variations in the size, structure and order of succession, and there are distinct differences across the Shona, Venda, Ndebele, Tonga and Kalanga ethnic communities. In some areas, such as Mudzi and Mutoko, women are not prohibited from chieftaincy roles while AmaNdebele society is highly patriarchal (Nyathi, 2017) and female chiefs are seen as taboo.

There are, however, some similarities. In many societies – not only in Zimbabwe – traditional leadership is based on male primogeniture, meaning succession through the first-born sons in particular. Succession traditions and norms have perpetuated the inferiority of women in decision-making positions, with traditional leadership marked as the political preserve of men. Kiamba (2008) suggests that women who occupy male-reserved positions or challenge the hegemonic masculinities are likely to face opposition to their leadership. The few women that have made it to influential political positions have less access to power than their male counterparts (Goetz, 2002).

This has not, however, always been the case. Traditional leadership changed between the pre- and post-colonial periods. In pre-colonial times, women had influential roles in politics as chiefs or advisors to chiefs. Examples include Queen Lozikheyi from Matabeleland, who was an advisor to King Mzilikazi, who was known as the force behind the Ndebele Uprisings.

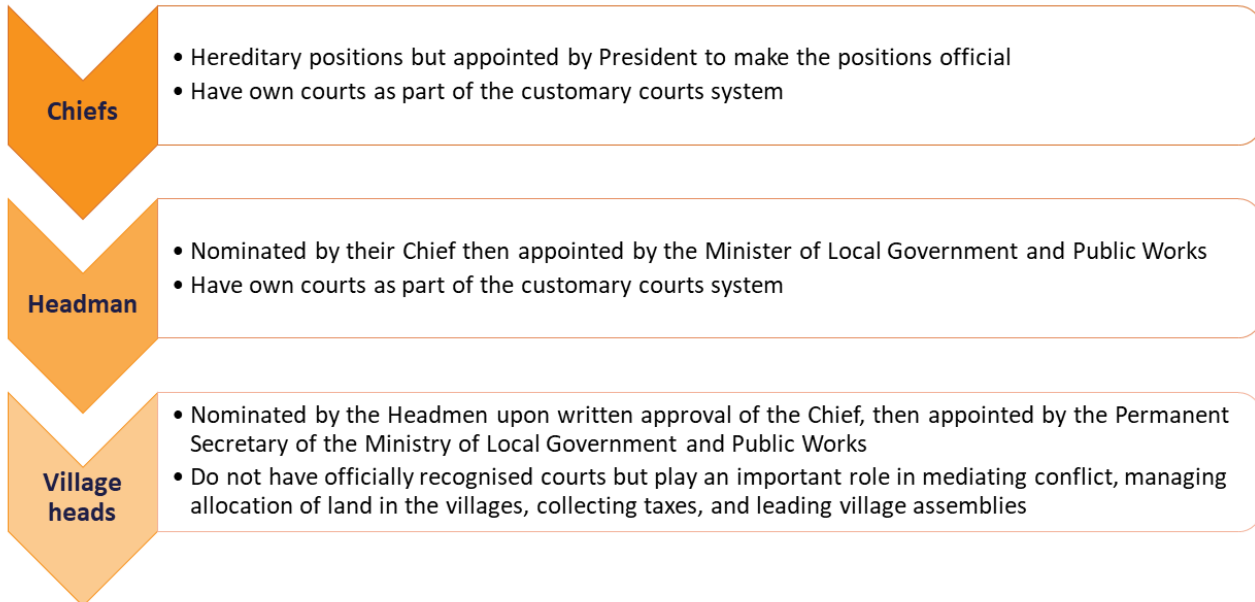
When colonial Rhodesia came to dominate the political landscape, traditional leadership was redefined. While male traditional leaders saw their powers become limited to judicial and administrative decisions, women traditional leaders lost their powers completely. Nkomo (2015) cites the example of what happened after two Manica female headmen died: there was no attempt to appoint successors, as colonial rule sought to make women in politics invisible. This stemmed from a desire to impose gender norms about women that were transported from Victorian England and that were seen as superior to the norms already in place on the African continent. The Rhodesian government, therefore, aimed to keep African women away from politics or any other public sphere.

During the liberation struggle women played a role that was as significant as that of men. However, post-colonial Zimbabwe re-invented and adopted a colonial legacy that marginalised women, despite the enactment of laws to uphold women's equality and support liberal feminist reforms. These laws included the Legal Age Majority Act of 1982 (LAMA) which allowed women to vote and contest in elections, and the Sex Disqualification Act, which allowed women to hold public office and Equal Pay Act (Ziyamabi, 1997). Rural women, however, found themselves excluded from these changes. This reinforced hegemonic masculinities in rural areas, making it difficult for women to break the glass ceiling in traditional leadership.

In today's Zimbabwe, traditional leadership is embedded in the country's legal system and is made up of three levels: chief, headman and village head, as shown in Figure 1. While succession customs of traditional leadership vary from one community to the next, there are government regulations that stipulate how traditional leaders are appointed. Section 283 (3) of the Constitution of Zimbabwe and section 3(2) of Traditional Leaders Act [Chapter 29:17] state that chiefs are appointed by the President in accordance with the customs and traditions of a given society. This means

that while the President has the power to appoint traditional leaders, the President should abide by the standing customs and traditions of a given community when making such an appointment. Headmen are appointed by chiefs, while village heads are, in turn, appointed by the headmen.

Figure 1: Hierarchy of traditional leadership in Zimbabwe



Source: Adapted from Baldwin and Muyengwa (2014, 2).

The functions and role of traditional leaders are outlined in section 282 (2) of the Constitution and the Traditional Leaders Act [Chapter 29:17]. These include, for example, acting as the custodians of the cultural values of their communities, expediting the development and distribution of land, protecting the environment, resolving conflicts in their communal areas and carrying out religious roles, such as rainmaking ceremonies. The powers of traditional leaders are exerted through their religious roles, as they are perceived to be closer to ancestors and able, therefore, to act as intermediaries between the spiritual world and human beings.

The powers of traditional leaders at local level are primarily judicial, as they resolve conflicts and govern resources and land. Studies have shown that rural citizens tend to find traditional leaders more trustworthy than elected officials because of their close community involvement, while elected officials are seen as absent and detached from the lived experiences of rural citizens (Chigwata, 2016). Given the powers of traditional leaders (particularly males) within their communities and at national level they have more influence than elected leaders on improving the status of women in traditional leadership.

Traditional leaders play a critical role in the politics of Zimbabwe, which stems from the use of chiefs by colonial governments to control rural citizens (Chigwata, 2016). On the one hand, their relationship with the state has been based on patronage, whereby they depend on the state funds for community developments. On the other hand, the state depends on traditional leaders to mobilise voters in rural areas (Kurebwa, 2020).

Ahead of the 2023 elections, the media gave broad coverage to the role of traditional leaders as enablers of the ruling party, the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU PF). Many chiefs have expressed public support for the party – going against the Constitution of Zimbabwe which requires chiefs to be impartial (Mashininga, 2023). A study by Ndoma (2021) shows that while rural citizens still support their chiefs, such partisan statements have undermined trust and confidence. In the eyes of the government, however, the legitimacy of chiefs is linked to their loyalty to the ruling party (Kurebwa, 2020).

Research objectives

It is evident that the experiences of women in traditional leadership in Zimbabwe are overshadowed by male experiences. Our study, therefore, aims to fill a gap in research and literature by examining their experiences and capturing their rarely heard voice (Dodo, 2013).

The study has three specific objectives:

1. To analyse the experiences of women in traditional leadership
2. To examine the factors that inform female traditional leadership, including gender norms
3. To explore the support that women traditional leaders receive, from family to national level, and whether these support systems have been effective.

To achieve these objectives the study was guided by the following questions:

1. How do women in traditional leadership roles experience these positions and what factors influence their experiences?
2. How do women in traditional leadership roles navigate challenges to their leadership and what support do they get from different actors? What impact has this support had?

Gender norms in this study refers to social expectations around how women are supposed to act. Patriarchal gender norms limit women's exercise of power, which is a challenge for women in traditional leadership as they are transgressing expectations of how to behave (Harper et al., 2020). Many women abide by the standing gender norms (Kiamba, 2008), and those that rise to positions seen as reserved for men are likely to face greater challenges than their male counterparts.

Our study also examined varying identities that intersect with the gendered experience of leadership for women in traditional roles and that result in their diverse experiences. We used an intersectionality approach: an analytical framework that identifies systems of oppression or advantage that informs one's experiences.

Methodology

Before the study, TechVillage sought ethical clearance from the Ministry of Local Governance and Public Works (MLGPW), which oversees traditional leadership institutions in Zimbabwe.

The study used qualitative methods, with interviews and focus group discussions enabling an in-depth examination of the experiences of female traditional chiefs. Detailed interviews allowed participants to offer their own reflections and experiences of leadership in the local languages in which they were most comfortable. As a result, interviews used vocabulary and expressions that reflected their lived experiences as traditional leaders.

Data were collected from 35 female traditional leaders, 25 male traditional leaders, and five women's rights organisations operating in rural Zimbabwe. It was vital to include male chiefs in the

study to explore how men have supported women in leadership and enable an in-depth analysis of the different experiences of men and women. Each interview lasted an average of 30 to 45 minutes. Geographically, the study covered eight of Zimbabwe's 10 provinces, with the remaining two (Harare and Bulawayo) being metropolitan provinces that do not have traditional leadership.

A snowballing technique was used to map the study's participants in the absence of up-to-date records or database. Contacts obtained from the MLGPW were used as the base. Extensive phone calls to the few known traditional leaders paved the way for relationship building with those that were newly identified. In some cases, researchers had to physically visit identified rural remote areas as part of the mapping exercise.

The study was carried out during preparations for the 2023 elections, which presented a challenge for the data collection process. We were not able to reach some participants who were busy assisting in campaigns and presidential visits. Even those who were available were not always at liberty to speak for security reasons. Researchers ensured that the confidentiality and anonymity of participants were upheld by, for example, obtaining verbal consent so that no paper was signed. The data collected from the interviews were analysed thematically and synthesised to allow effective reporting.

Findings

'Some say I am too young to be a traditional leader so I cannot make rational decisions, therefore people end up not having confidence in bringing cases to me.'

Female village head

The study's findings are presented in two broad themes: gender-based intersectional resistance to, and the gender-based systemic barriers faced by, female traditional leaders. These themes were explored specifically to draw out the varying factors and identities that shape the experiences of female traditional leaders in Zimbabwe.

Gender-based intersectional resistance

This section presents data on leadership norms that have been shaped by characteristics and experiences that intersect with gender: masculine leadership norms, ageism, marital status and sexual violence, education, respectability and modesty, traditions around menstruation, and concerns around an evolving culture.

Masculine leadership norms

All female chiefs reported that their adoption of their leadership roles was clouded by extensive resistance from their immediate community, family and political circles. One major source of this resistance was the fact that they were women, and that this was considered a taboo. In Matabeleland, for example, there is no word for a 'female chief' in the isiNdebele vocabulary. A male chief is called '*induna*', but there is no female equivalent. Another linguistic example provided by the

participants, was the proverb: 'only bulls could lead a *kraal*,² not cows'. According to the responses from female traditional leaders, such cultural connotations were widely used by their communities to oppose their leadership positions.

Interactions with one of the male chiefs in Matabeleland showed that the socio-economic and political composition of Ndebele kingdoms was built largely around such chiefs, who were supposed to be able-bodied men that could even lead their societies in battle if necessary. Since women were not seen as having military experience or capabilities, it was imperative for chiefs to be drawn from male candidates within the lineage of a royal family.

Internal family differences also rocked the installation of female chiefs. One female chief who came from a family that did not have a son to inherit the father's throne faced extensive resistance from relatives who wanted the throne to be passed to the father's second family, which had a male child. It was only through the intervention of the former and late president that the female chief was finally installed.

Although women are allowed to become traditional leaders, in some areas such as Mudzi and Mutoko in Mashonaland East Province, they still face resistance from family patriarchs, particularly uncles and brothers. During a focus group discussion, one female village head said that she faced more resistance from her family than from outsiders:

'I face resistance and opposition from male family members who have not come to terms with my ascendancy. I hardly face this challenge outside my family members.'

Disrespect and resistance from family members are rooted in gender norms and power differences that are embedded in familial relations. These relationships are revered and have a significant influence on women's leadership. For example, a *sekuru* (mother's brother) may be younger than the female traditional leader but can decide not to respect a *muzukuru* (daughter of a sister). A female chief added:

'My relatives do not attend meetings as much as other community members and this has been difficult for me because the community perceives that I favour my people and I do not reprimand them, but some of them are my *sekurus* and how do I reprimand my elders?'

Ageism

Ageism was highlighted by the study's participants. Age is a significant marker in Zimbabwe's politics, which has a history of gerontocracy: older men and women holding power. Discrimination based on age has, however, a greater impact on women than men (Ramosunya, 2020). Among the Ndebele it can be particularly significant because women are considered '*abantwana*' (children), and such patronising attitudes keep them out of decision-making positions. A male chief from Matabeleland confirmed this distinction, saying:

'I ascended to chieftaincy in my mid-20s I never felt disrespected because of my age: my community respected my decisions. However, it is different from my female colleagues. I have had

² A traditional African enclosure for cattle.

numerous complaints from them about how their subjects were not totally submitting to them. This is so because the ideology that women are children is still a common tradition.'

Female traditional leaders confirmed such views, reporting that they were disrespected because of their young age – a disrespect made worse by the fact that they were women. During a focus group discussion, one female village head from Masvingo noted that:

'I have old men and women who do not adhere to my rulings because they say I am young enough to be their child, or worse, grandchild. As a result, they by-pass protocol by going straight to the headman, which is unacceptable.'

One female chief also noted that:

'When it comes to community leadership, it is hard already to lead as a woman and doing this at a young age makes it even more difficult. For example, it took a long time for my community to take me seriously mainly because they culturally considered me as a young girl who had no authority over the elders. I remember how some elders within my council would sometimes disregard my orders and want to impose orders.'

A similar response came from another female village head who stated that:

'No matter how brilliant you are, or how much authority you have, if you are a young person, the older generation will always demand a level of respect that sometimes conflicts with the demands of your leadership position.'

While many participants highlighted discrimination against women seen as too young to be ruling over the older generation, older women were labelled as too old to make rational decisions. A female chief reported that:

'There are some male factions within my community that believe that I am too old to make rational decisions. Personally, I think they say so because I am a female. How many old male chiefs are there in Zimbabwe? Do you think they are also considered too old to make decisions or are they referred as wise due to old age?'

The same response was given by a female headman who noted that:

'It's amazing how when you are man, they say you get wiser as you age, but you are incapacitated when you are a woman.'

Such responses are a testament of how women in general are looked down upon by their societies. In short, there is no right age for a woman to be in a traditional leadership role. They are seen as either too young or too old for leadership.

In contrast, male chiefs who were installed at a young age were given more respect by the community than the female traditional leaders. For example, a general response from the male chiefs showed that once they were installed the community considered them to be men rather than boys.

Marital status and sexual violence

A young female village head lamented that inappropriate relations or advances by men were the greatest challenge faced by young, single or widowed women. Some female traditional leaders complained about men making sexual advances to them because they are 'single and may lack the rationality to make sound judgements and decisions'. Another female village head who participated in a focus group discussion said:

'A man will start respecting you but as times goes on, they stop respecting you and start showing interests. They say that women who do not have partners [are not] rational and are too emotional.'

The inappropriate advances made towards women hinder them from exercising their authority independently because they fear that measures might be taken against them. It has become the norm in Zimbabwe for women participating in politics to be threatened via text messages or any other form of social media to discourage them from participating in politics. For that reason, these women leaders appoint men in influential positions whom they trust to protect them from such forms of abuse.

Education

'It's sad that as a women, society needs to validate or accept my leadership skills by my educational level'.

Female headman

The study found that women traditional leaders were all educated, with 28% of them having degrees, while 32% had diplomas, 20% had national certificates (the lowest level of tertiary qualification in Zimbabwe) and the remaining 20% having basic ordinary level qualifications.

According to one female traditional leader, education was used as a shield from misogyny:

'There is a different form of respect afforded to you when you are an educated woman.'

This resonated with a response from a female headman who had a degree in local governance:

'My degree has worked to my favour because my court proceedings and judgements are now characterised by high respect.'

Some male chiefs also agreed that some community members, particularly men, tend to give more respect to women with an education than to those without. However, the general responses from the male chiefs showed that this was not the case with men. One male chief noted that:

'It's true our fellow female leaders must put twice the effort than us before they are recognised, and I personally think these are deep seated traditional stereotypes that put women on the back foot.'

In line with the other responses given, when one male chief who did not have any educational qualifications, was asked if society disrespected him as a result, his response was to say:

'I have never felt disrespected: my community respects me as they did my father.'

These responses suggest that education enables female traditional leaders to earn greater trust and respect from community members. The educational background for male chiefs, however, was not seen as important. Female traditional leaders, therefore, have achieved far more, in terms of education, to gain respect from their respective communities.

Respectability and modesty: clothing and appearance

'I knew that this was largely coming from the masculine community who felt disrespected by being led by a woman who wears trousers.'

Female headman

Gender norms tied to the body and looks also affect the female traditional leaders who were interviewed. In many traditional or conservative contexts, including Zimbabwe, women's appearance comes under constant scrutiny (Manyonga, 2017). For example, some societies in Zimbabwe do not accept women wearing any form of trousers and body-hugging clothes (Manwa and Ndamba, 2011; Manyonga, 2017).

Female traditional leaders reported that they were often singled out for the way they dress, and that this sometimes affected their confidence in the execution of their duties. They noted, for example, that the wearing of tight jeans, skirts above knee-level and sleeveless tops was very much shunned. According to some female village heads, wearing such clothes would result in them being labelled as 'loose' or not being taken seriously. Such a situation put pressure on some traditional leaders who wore overalls when going to their workspaces. One female chief mentioned that:

'During my initial days as a chief, I remember one of my close headmen suggested to me that I should try not to wear my trousers when I was conducting our court sessions or meetings with the community because the community was not happy about it.'

Even though women face such stigmatisation from men and other society members, it is worth noting that some of the female traditional leaders interviewed also disapproved of women wearing trousers. For example, one of the female chiefs had at some point put a ban on women wearing trousers and growing dreadlocks. Although this ban was short-lived because of a backlash from the community, it shows that even women sometimes believe and enforce such gender norms.

Traditions around menstruation

'Even some of my family members opposed my ascendancy, vowing that they could not have a menstruating being as the highest leader in their community.'

Female chief

Menstruation was used as an excuse to hinder female traditional leaders from performing certain tasks, such as rainmaking ceremonies and conducting court cases, to mention a few. One female village head explained:

'We have the *doro remusoso* [beer brewed by men, used for the rainmaking ceremony]: as women we are not allowed to participate in these rituals. If we do then the ancestors may not accept our prayers.'

Another female village head supported this view, adding:

'Being a woman sometimes is a curse because you have so many limitations to do your duties, and this makes the community think less of you.'

One male chief noted that:

'Following our traditions and customs, it is a taboo for women to lead during their menstruation period. Since the body will be cleaning itself, that blood is what makes them unclean as such ancestors would not be pleased to communicate with someone who is considered unclean.'

Another male chief even quoted from the Holy Bible saying:

'Even the book of Leviticus, 15, explicitly notes that women are unclean during their seven days of menstruation. You will realise that our culture also borrows some values from the Bible.'

When asked about such cultural stereotypes, female traditional leaders agreed that they were aware of such beliefs. Giving an example, one female headman noted that:

'We are considered to be bearers of bad luck during that period.'

The study revealed distinctions between women who were considered sexually active, those still menstruating and those who had reached their menopause. The findings showed that women who had reached their menopause were considered clean enough to participate in traditional ceremonies such as rainmaking, land cleansing³ and first fruits celebrations.

³ Land cleansing involves cutting down trees that were struck by lightning, or those that were used by people to take their life. The process also includes dedicating the land to the ancestors.

Today, in cases where women cannot participate in certain rituals the brother or closest male member of the family can represent the woman traditional chief instead. Some female traditional leaders acknowledged that because of equal rights and the modernisation of society such stigmas are slowly losing relevance. In the past, women were told that they would face the wrath of the ancestors if they defied such values.

Concerns around an evolving culture

Most of the traditional leaders interviewed highlighted that Zimbabwe's culture is evolving and that some factions of the country's traditional leadership institutions have accepted the inclusion of women. However, while women reported that they still face limits to their exercise of authority, such views were dismissed by most traditional male chiefs. They felt that traditional society was now compromising a great deal, mainly because of a pressure to fit into modern notions of gender equality and women rights. For example, one male chief noted that:

'We are living in the feminist era which is slowly but surely shredding our value systems as Mthwakazi, and there is nothing we can do about it as the custodians of culture.'

Another response from a male chief was that:

'Foreign values are now being forced on us in the name of women's empowerment and this is done at the expense of our culture [...] This is why we are now facing unending droughts, wide spread incurable diseases, because as the black community we have destroyed our values.'

The unfair stigmatisation of female traditional leaders was reported as affecting the self-esteem of some female traditional leaders when performing their duties, and at times bringing fear to those who were superstitious.

Gender-based systemic barriers

'In some cases, there is a clash of duties not only between work and traditional leadership duties, but also family responsibilities. This puts a heavy toll on me, leading to fatigue and anxiety.'

Female village head

Tensions between work and personal life

The challenges to a work-life balance were cited as key barriers that limit the ability of leaders to conduct their roles. Most study participants were employed in other formal jobs, particularly teaching and jobs in offices. Few female traditional leaders owned businesses compared to male traditional leaders. A significant number of female traditional leaders said they were failing to balance their work and family responsibilities. For example, some reported that they sometimes

skipped or delayed the execution of their roles as traditional leaders because of professional work commitments. One female village head said that:

'For the most part it has been difficult for me to balance my work duties with my traditional duties, and this pushes me to either delegate work or postpone traditional meetings.'

In their study on gender inequality in the household, Cerrato and Cifre (2018) found that a failure by most women to balance their work-life duties increases conflict both at work and within the family. Another study by Cano et al. (2023) showed that the double or triple roles carried out by women often result in serious burnout and in some cases mental health challenges. These findings can be generalised to the findings of this study, as female traditional leaders stated that they are, in some cases, caught between work, family and community conflicts – a situation that can cascade to trigger mental health issues.

A female village head gave an example of how she has faced such conflicts:

'There are times I kept on postponing some traditional court cases that I was supposed to attend because my time at work was not allowing me. This created an outcry from the community, with some members even noting that I was incompetent for the leadership role.'

A response by a female headman described a work-conflict she had encountered:

'My work superiors know about my traditional leadership position and its requirements, however, sometimes there are tensions that arise especially when I fail to meet work deadlines.'

Some traditional female leaders noted that society – and men in particular – took advantage of such situations to label them as incompetent. Furthermore, other gender norms that add to the burdens already carried by women can exacerbate this challenge. One interesting example was given by a female village head who noted that:

'I remember I was once called to a closed meeting where I was asked to step down as a village head if I felt like I was succumbing to pressure of balancing duties. Personally, I felt this was not done in good faith but as an indirect message to discourage me so that I could quit.'

Although some male chiefs own their own businesses, they also indicated that they sometimes found it difficult to balance work with their traditional duties. However, none of the male chiefs indicated that they had been pressured to step down. The comparison of the two situations shows that women are, in some cases, targeted because they are stigmatised as being weak.

Unfair distribution of roles and responsibilities

Some respondents suggested that there is unequal distribution of power because women traditional leaders are not given the same duties as men. According to research participants, women are considered by male chiefs as incapable of carrying out various leadership roles, such as leading a delegation to the President. The study established that male chiefs are still uncomfortable with assigning women responsibilities that are usually seen as masculine. Some responsibilities meant for men, listed during the interviews, included President of the Chiefs' Council, Chairperson of the Chiefs' Council and leader of the Chiefs' Court. In contrast, the roles reserved for women include secretary, providing catering during functions of the Chiefs' Council and any social welfare duties.

In addition, women are excluded from other decision-making position in areas with natural resources. Governance of natural resources remains masculine despite women's greater involvement in the use and conservation of natural resources (Sithole et al., 2021). This exclusion is usually caused by cultural and traditional practices and economic barriers. In most rural areas women's access to land is usually through their male relatives, such as their father, son or brother. Hence, it is difficult for women to have equal access to land. For female traditional leaders it is challenging to be decision-makers at community level on issues of natural resources when at family level they do not have equal access and control of land.

The relegation of women to support roles is interpreted by many leaders as a symptom of tokenism – an issue also highlighted by the increased appointment of women as village heads before the 2018 elections. According to WROs, this shows that such appointments are mainly a political campaign strategy by the ruling party to 'buy' women's votes. It also overshadows the competence of women in leadership by making society think women are only installed as political pawns, rather than for their leadership capabilities. A representative of one WRO reported that:

'In order to win the female vote, politicians know that they need to use female influencers, and female village heads are among those influencers.'

This practice was also noted by a male chief in the Gokwe area who highlighted he has 'unofficially registered' female traditional leaders to meet the needs of women within his jurisdiction. When asked the meaning of 'unofficially registered', he responded that all village heads should be registered with the District Administration Office, but these selected women were not registered because all the current village head positions were filled (mostly by men).

Musekiwa (2012) argued that village heads are the leaders that are closest, physically, to the people and, as such, play a pivotal role in community mobilisation. A human rights lawyer Marufu Mandevere, quoted in Mutsaka (2023:1), noted that:

'We have some of the best laws and policies on gender equality and women representation, but that's just on paper. The reality on the ground is that the role of women in politics is restricted to being fervent supporters and dependable voters.'

From the above given responses and analysis, it is evident that despite being capable societal leaders, women are unfairly denied official positions of leadership and they still face discrimination based on their gender.

Lack of support from other women in politics

Female traditional leaders lamented the lack of support from other women in politics, particularly those in Parliament. Consequently, the plight of women in traditional leadership is not addressed because little is known about their lived experiences – a situation that is reflected in outdated and insufficient legal frameworks, such as the Traditional Leaders Act. A female headman said:

'These female parliamentarians represent us *wrongly*, yet there is never a time for them to interact with us. They are more inclined to male chiefs than us, so we are on our own.'

In response to the lack of representation, WROs have been running leadership development programmes to bridge representation and leadership gaps. WROs also confirmed that they hold community training workshops to sensitise communities on gender equality and leadership issues. Female chiefs added that, in addition to the work by WROs and other non-governmental organisations (NGOs), they also receive leadership development training from the MLGPW.

Family control over decision-making

Chieftaincy is family oriented and decisions are often discussed at family level before they are taken to the village council. Family members, therefore, play a significant role in either hindering (as discussed earlier) or fostering the leadership of female traditional leaders. Too often, familial involvement in decision making can be a hindrance to women's ability to exercise their authority with independence.

In a small number of cases, women have received support from their family so that they can gain respect from the community. One female village head, for example, mentioned receiving support from war veterans who then became a vocal and powerful force in her leadership. She said:

'I get my support from war veterans, they have been very supportive. My community does not disrespect me. If there are any unruly community members, war veterans are just a call away. I just call and say so and so come here *paita mutenges* [translated as someone who is rebellious and unsupportive of ZANU-PF ideologies].'

Support – moral, financial, emotional and social – is an important pillar for women's survival in traditional leadership. A female chief said:

'My husband has been supportive to an extent of allowing me to use our personal finances to support my community especially widows.'

She added her husband's support has protected her from name-calling and disrespect, not only from the family but also from community members. Some women acknowledged spousal support goes as far as playing the role of secretary and providing childcare whilst they carry out their chiefly duties.

Ultimately, spousal support has some influence on the experiences of women in traditional leadership. The perceptions shaped around that support by local community members is gendered and can include comments such as: 'the husband intervenes too much in the affairs of the community'. According to one male chief, people's perceptions about spousal support are different for women and men: when a woman is supported by a man 'she cannot rule on her own', but a man who is supported by a woman 'can rule and has sufficient support from his wife'.

Conclusions

The experiences of women in traditional leadership roles are diverse and are shaped by intersecting identities and factors such as age, marital status and education. They are rooted in gender norms that differentiate between women's expected roles and behaviours and those of men. These norms are, in turn, embedded in systemic features and practices within traditional leadership politics, such as a lack of support from female parliamentarians and family members, which limit women's ability to exercise power and enjoy equal representation in decision-making and governance.

Our study concludes that while the number of women in traditional leadership might be rising as a sign of their ability to attain such roles, their positions do not equate to or represent authority or equal access to power and resources. Although it is known that female leadership is likely to improve the welfare of women in rural areas, women in traditional leadership continue to face discrimination that hinders their recognition.

Women need to be seen as leaders in a way that transcends the numerical targets of laws and policies passed by the state. Rather, they should be seen as active contributors to Zimbabwe's development and its peacebuilding negotiations.

Recommendations

The findings of this study point to several recommendations to improve the experiences of women in traditional leadership roles and ensure their equal inclusion and representation in democratic political structures at the local level. Affirmative action is needed to address the plight of women in traditional leadership roles, including legal reforms and changes in both policies and attitudes towards their leadership. Our recommendations are as follows:

- **Create spaces for female traditional leaders**, at both local and national levels, to allow them to shape policies and better represent the needs of rural women:
 - o The Ministry of Women Affairs could reserve seats and positions for women in traditional leadership within the Ministry, such as a stand-alone section, with a focus on women in local governance.
 - o The Traditional Leaders Act, which has not been amended since 1998, could be updated to recognise gender differences among traditional leaders and enable women traditional leaders to contest laws (currently, gender-based discrimination is highlighted in the Constitution, but not in the Traditional Leaders Act).
 - o More training by civil society, ministries and other stakeholders should target women in traditional leadership to enable them to take advantage of these newly created spaces and opportunities.
- **Male traditional leaders and male community elders need to be involved in breaking down the gender norms** that, at present, hinder them from sharing power with female traditional leaders. Organisations that provide female traditional leaders trainings could offer training for men in rural areas with the support of men who are already traditional leaders.

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About ALIGN

ALIGN is a digital platform and programme of work that is creating a global community of researchers and thought leaders, all committed to gender justice and equality. It provides new research, insights from practice, and grants for initiatives that increase our understanding of – and work to change – discriminatory gender norms. Through its vibrant and growing digital platform, and its events and activities, ALIGN aims to ensure that the best of available knowledge and resources have a growing impact on harmful gender norms.

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Female Chief, Nonhlanhla Ndube, conducting a traditional meeting. © Sally Nyakanyanga, 2018.

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