

Exploring Women's Contributions, Challenges, and Perceptions in Agricultural Production in Macheke, Zimbabwe: A Study to Inform Policy and Practice

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Abstract: This study explores the pivotal role of women in agricultural production in Macheke, Zimbabwe, with a focus on their contributions, challenges, and perceptions. Adopting a qualitative research method, the study gathered data from 30 participants through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. The research objectives were to investigate the contributions of women in agricultural production, identify the challenges they face, and understand their perceptions. The findings reveal that women play a vital role in agricultural production, significantly contributing to food security, household income, and economic growth. However, they encounter various challenges, including limited access to productive resources, a lack of knowledge and training, and underrepresentation in leadership positions. To address these challenges, the study recommends that policymakers develop and implement policies that promote women's participation in agriculture, improve their access to productive resources, such as land, inputs, and credit, and provide training and capacity-building programs. Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of women's empowerment in improving their participation in agriculture and enhancing their livelihoods. These findings have significant implications for policy and practice, emphasising the need for policymakers and practitioners to develop and implement policies and programs that support women's participation in agriculture and address the challenges they face. Ultimately, contributing to a deeper understanding of the role of women in agricultural production and informing strategies to promote their empowerment and participation in the agricultural sector.

Key words: women in agriculture, agricultural production, food security, household income, economic growth, women's empowerment.

1. Introduction and Background to the Study

The role of women in agricultural production is a vital component of global food security, economic growth, and development. Historically, women's contributions to agriculture have been underrecognized, undervalued, and underrepresented at leadership levels, despite their significant impact on the sector (Brown, 2009). Therefore, this study seeks to explore women's contributions, challenges, and perceptions in agricultural production in Macheke, Zimbabwe. Through an in-depth examination of the experiences of women in agriculture, the study will bridge the information gap and provide valuable insights that inform policy and practice, ultimately enhancing the productivity and well-being of women in the agricultural sector. Agriculture is a cornerstone of the global economy, accounting for approximately one-fifth of the total Gross World Product (GWP) and

employing millions of people worldwide (USDA, 2010). Women's contributions to agriculture are indispensable for increasing food security, employment creation, and poverty reduction (Shortfall, 2010). In developed countries, such as the United States, women comprise nearly 30% of all farmers and account for over a quarter of the agricultural workforce (USDA, 2010). They are engaged in a broad spectrum of agricultural activities, including crop and livestock production, food processing, marketing, packaging, and distribution (FAO, 2011).

Globally, women's roles in agriculture vary significantly. In the United Kingdom, women play a pivotal role in agricultural production, despite facing numerous challenges (Gibson et al., 2011). Notably, only 13% of farmers in the UK are women, and they tend to own smaller farms than their male counterparts (Gibson et al., 2011). Furthermore, women in the UK are underrepresented in decision-making positions, constituting only 15% of the members of the National Farmers Union (Gibson et al., 2011). In Asia, women constitute a substantial proportion of the agricultural workforce. Specifically, in China, women make up around 40% of the agricultural workforce (Li, 2006). They play a crucial role in meeting the basic needs of their families and communities through the cultivation of cash crops and animal husbandry (Li, 2006). Nevertheless, women in Asia encounter numerous challenges, including limited access to land, credit, and training, as well as discriminatory social norms and practices (Li, 2006; Sun, 2012).

In Africa, women play a vital role in agriculture, constituting 43% of the agricultural labour force (FAO, 2017). In certain countries, such as Malawi, Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya, women comprise the majority of agricultural workers (FAO, 2017). Women in Africa are involved in diverse roles, including land preparation, crop maintenance, harvesting, marketing, and selling, as well as animal husbandry (Kroma and Oyewole, 2005). In Zimbabwe, women play an essential role in agriculture, making up an estimated 55% of the agricultural workforce (Mthembu, 2007). They are involved in various agricultural activities, including crop cultivation, livestock rearing, marketing, and sales (Mthembu, 2007). Despite their significant contributions, women's roles in agriculture are often underestimated, and they face numerous challenges, including limited access to land, credit, and training (Guza, 2013; Kanani, 2020). For this reason, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of women in agricultural production in the Macheke Area, highlighting their contributions, challenges, and perceptions. The findings will also inform policy and practice, ultimately enhancing the productivity and well-being of women in the agricultural sector.

2. Theoretical Framework

The Role Theory is a sociological framework that explains how individuals develop their sense of self and behaviour based on their social interactions and expectations (Thompson & Greene, 2017). This theory posits that individuals occupy various roles in society, and these roles are associated with specific expectations, norms, and behaviours (Biddle, 1986). The Role Theory was developed by several sociologists, including Ralph Linton Turner, Jacob Moreno, Herbert Blumer, and George Herbert Mead, who laid the groundwork for understanding the complex relationships between individuals and society. Ralph Linton Turner, an American anthropologist, contributed to the development of the Role Theory by highlighting the importance of role-taking and role standpoint in shaping individual behaviour (Turner, 1956). Jacob Moreno, a psychotherapist, developed the theory of role-taking and role-playing, which emphasizes the significance of social interactions in shaping individual behaviour (Moreno, 1946). Herbert Blumer, an American sociologist, developed the symbolic interactionist perspective, which focuses on the role of symbols and meaning in shaping individual behaviour and interactions (Blumer, 1969). George Herbert Mead, an American philosopher and sociologist, developed the theory of social behaviourism, which laid the groundwork for the Role Theory by emphasizing the importance of social relationships in shaping individual behaviour (Mead, 1934).

The Role Theory applies to this study on the role of women in agricultural production in several ways. Firstly, it helps to understand the various roles that women occupy in agricultural production, including their

responsibilities, expectations, and behaviours. Secondly, the theory highlights the importance of social interactions and expectations in shaping women's behaviour and performance in agricultural production. Thirdly, the Role Theory helps to identify potential role conflicts and ambiguities that women may experience in agricultural production, such as balancing work and family responsibilities. Finally, the theory informs strategies to empower women in agricultural production, such as providing training and support to enhance their skills and confidence.

3. Related Literature Review

This section provides a review of the literature on the role of women in agricultural production. The review is guided by the Role Theory, which posits that individuals develop their sense of self and behaviour based on their social interactions and expectations. Women play a vital role in ensuring food security, employment creation, poverty reduction, and income generation (Agarwal, 2009; Meinzen-Dick, 2011; Badianne, 2006). They contribute significantly to the agricultural labour force, performing a wide range of tasks, including crop production, animal husbandry, fish farming, forestry, fruit tree production, apiculture, and horticulture (Dolan, 2012; Kinyanjui, 2003; De Haan, 2004; Padoch, 2001; Lamine, 2010; Ickowitz, 2010; Wollni, 2015). Despite their significant contributions, women in agriculture face numerous challenges, including inadequate capital and funding, lack of knowledge and training, limited access to productive resources, underrepresentation in leadership positions, exclusion in decision-making, and gender-based discrimination and marginalization (Meinzen-Dick, 2015; Benson-Rea, 2015; Ringler, 2010; Schenck, 2010; Franco, 2016; Amin, 2013). Women in agriculture are often perceived as less capable, incompetent, less knowledgeable, and skilled, less deserving and unworthy, and possessing inadequate decision-making capability (Telesetsky, 2010; Ringrose, 2013; Bharadwaj, 2018; Roach, 2015). These negative perceptions have led to the undervaluation of women's contributions to agriculture and have limited their access to productive resources and support. Despite these challenges and negative perceptions, women in agriculture have received support in various forms, including funding, inputs, training and extension services, policy support, and economic and social empowerment programs (Meinzen-Dick, 2012; Schlein, 2012; Iannotti, 2011; Bargawi, 2015; Van De Ploeg, 2018). These initiatives aim to address the disparities in access to resources and decision-making power, promote sustainable agriculture, and empower women in agriculture.

4. Research Methodology

This study adopts an interpretivist research philosophy, which focuses on understanding human phenomena within a specific context (Blanche, Durrheim & Painter, 2006). An in-depth understanding of the role of women in agricultural production in the Macheke Area is thereby pursued through a qualitative research approach. The interpretivist philosophy is well-suited for this study, as it enables the study to explore the meanings, patterns, and conflicts that emerge from the participants' thoughts and behaviours (Mason, 2002). A case study approach is used in this research, which involves an empirical inquiry into a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin, 1994 cited in Gall, 2005). This approach provides rich, thick, and detailed descriptions of the phenomenon, allowing the study to gain a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. The target population for the study consists of men and women involved in agricultural production in the Macheke Area, including landowners, individuals who practice agricultural activities alongside their husbands or other relatives, and those who have inherited property. Forty-five participants were conveniently assembled for this study, facilitating an in-depth exploration of the research problem (Gay, 1976 cited in Merriam, 2008).

Interviews and focus group discussions are employed to gather qualitative data. Face-to-face verbal exchange between the researcher and participants during interviews provides first-hand information (Aggarwal, 2003). Focus group discussions stimulate insights among participants, yielding rich and detailed descriptions of the phenomenon (Bhattacharjee, 2012). Data analysis involves the use of qualitative data analysis methods, including organising, categorising, and interpreting data (Starke, 1995 cited in Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). Recurring

themes are identified and coded into categories, with specific responses quoted to illustrate the importance of each theme. Ultimately, providing a comprehensive understanding of the role of women in agricultural production in the Macheke Area through its qualitative research method.

5. Research Findings

Agriculture is a vital sector in many economies, and women play a crucial role in agricultural production. Despite their significant contributions, women in agriculture face various challenges and barriers that hinder their ability to participate fully in agricultural activities. However, the study reveals the following key findings:

5.1. Women's Contributions to Agricultural Production

- Women's involvement in agriculture is crucial for food security and household income.
- Women play a critical role in agricultural development, contributing to food security, household income, and economic growth.
- Women contribute significantly to agricultural growth, production, and development through their involvement in various agricultural activities.

5.2. Women's Involvement in Agricultural Activities

- Women are involved in a wide range of agricultural activities, including:
 - Crop production, livestock production, fruit production, fish farming, dairy production, mushroom production, vermiculture, horticulture, and market gardening.
 - Land preparation, sowing, watering, cultivating and weeding, pruning, manuring and fertilising, harvesting, threshing and decorticating, drying, winnowing, applying grain protectant and packing, storing, transporting, and marketing of produce.

5.3. Challenges and Barriers

- Women face challenges in accessing productive resources, including land, inputs, credit and other financial services.

5.4. Empowerment and Support

- Women's empowerment is critical for improving their participation in agriculture and enhancing their livelihoods.
- Women's involvement in decision-making processes is essential for ensuring their needs and interests are represented.

5.5. Support and Challenges

- Women in agriculture have received support from the government and other institutions, but there is a need for improvement in terms of timing and accessibility.

5.6. Supportive Environment

- Policies and programs are needed to support women's participation in agriculture.
- Sensitive policies and programs are needed to address the specific needs and challenges faced by women in agriculture.

5.7. Capacity Building and Support

- Training and capacity-building programs are essential for enhancing women's skills and knowledge in agriculture.
- Women's groups and cooperatives provide a platform for women to share knowledge, resources, and experiences.

5.8. External Factors

- Women in agriculture are vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.
- There is a need for improved infrastructure, including irrigation systems, roads, and storage facilities, to support women's agricultural activities.

6. Analysis and Discussion of the Findings

The findings provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of women in agricultural production. According to Mason (2002), women are crucial players in agricultural production, contributing significantly to food security and household income. These findings support this assertion, as the majority of the participants were landowners or farmers, and the age range of the participants suggests that women of various ages are involved in agricultural production. The study also found that the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents suggest that women in agricultural production are diverse in terms of their age, marital status, number of dependants, family type, educational status, employment status, and income status. This finding is consistent with the literature that has shown that women in agricultural production are a heterogeneous group with varying characteristics and experiences (Gall, 2005). The finding that most of the respondents were self-employed suggests that women in agricultural production are often entrepreneurs and have their own businesses. This is consistent with the literature that has revealed that women in agricultural production are often involved in small-scale farming and entrepreneurship (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). The study also found that the majority of the respondents had a low-income status, which suggests that women in agricultural production face economic challenges. This finding is consistent with the literature that has shown that women in agricultural production often face economic constraints and limited access to resources (Bhattacharjee, 2012). According to Aggarwal (2003), women are responsible for a significant proportion of agricultural production in many developing countries. The findings have implications for policy and practice, particularly in terms of supporting women's participation in agricultural production. Policymakers and practitioners may use these findings to develop policies and programs that support women's participation in agricultural production. Leedy and Ormrod (2005) suggest that policies and programs that support women's participation in agricultural production help to improve food security and household income.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

The study has indicated that women play a significant role in agricultural production, contributing to employment generation, poverty reduction, food security, and economic growth. The findings highlight the importance of women's participation in agriculture and the need for policymakers and practitioners to develop policies and programs that support women's involvement in the sector. The study also found that women perform a wide range of tasks in agricultural production, including crop production, livestock production, and marketing. However, women face significant challenges in accessing productive resources, including land, inputs, and credit and women in agriculture have received support from the government and other institutions, but there is still a need for improvement in terms of timing and accessibility. Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

- Policymakers should develop and implement policies that promote women's participation in agriculture and address the challenges they face.
- Women's access to productive resources, including land, inputs, and credit, should be improved through the elimination of barriers and discriminatory practices.
- Training and capacity building programs should be provided to women in agriculture to enhance their skills and knowledge in areas such as farm management, marketing, and entrepreneurship.
- Women's participation in decision-making processes and fora should be promoted to ensure that their voices are heard and their interests are represented.

- Women's groups and cooperatives should be supported to enable them to pool their resources, share knowledge, and negotiate better prices for their products.
- Women's access to markets and market information should be improved to enable them to make informed decisions about their products and prices.
- Climate-resilient agricultural practices should be developed and promoted to help women in agriculture adapt to climate change and improve their productivity.
- Women in agriculture should be supported to adopt technology, including mobile phones, computers, and other digital tools, to improve their productivity and efficiency.
- Mentorship programs should be established to pair experienced women farmers with novice farmers, providing guidance and support to help them navigate the challenges of agricultural production.
- The impact of policies and programs aimed at supporting women in agriculture should be monitored and evaluated to identify best practices and areas for improvement.
- Future research studies should focus on comparative analyses of the role of women in agricultural production in different geographical areas, including rural and urban areas

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