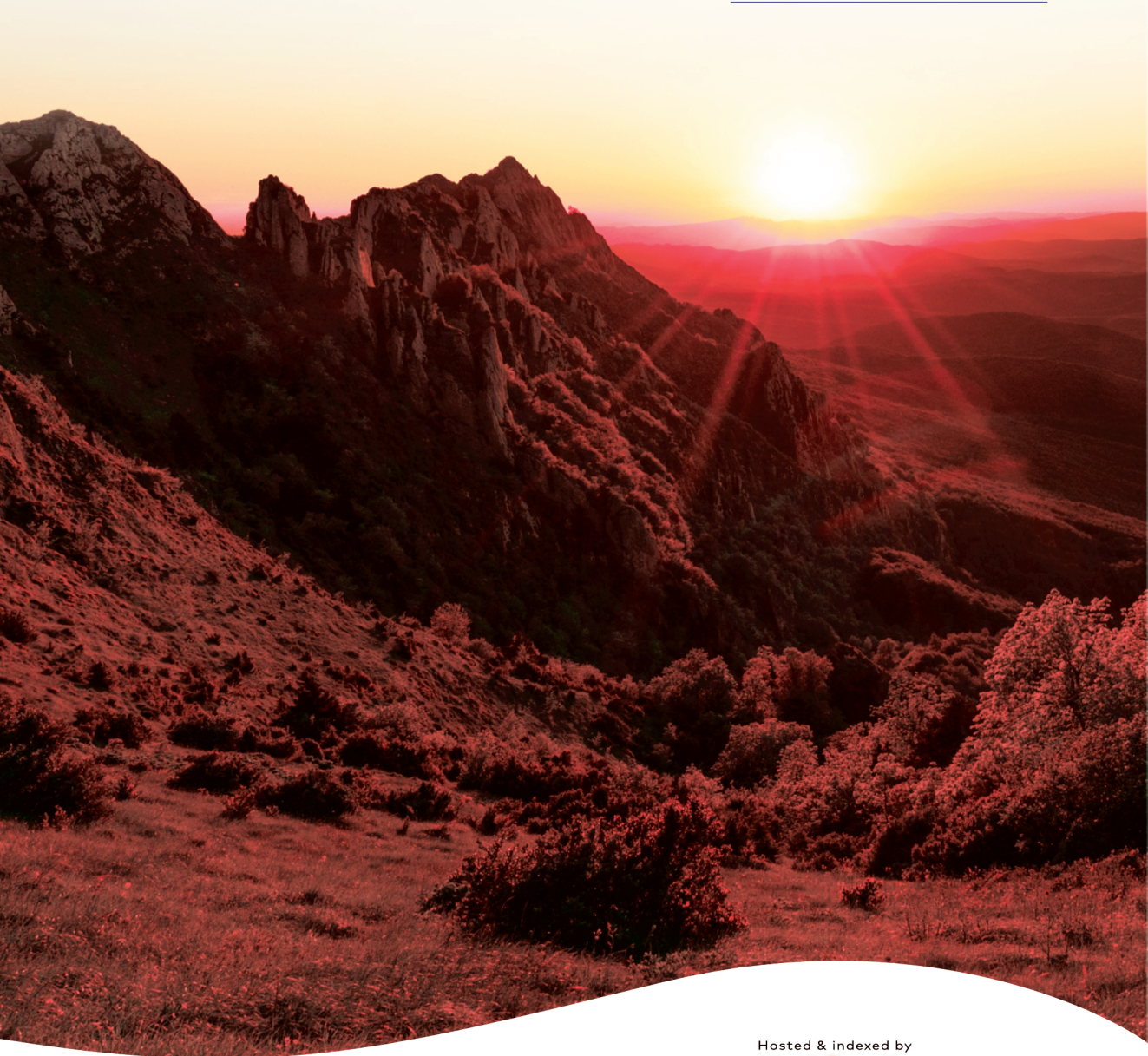


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Defying drought and water scarcity in rural Zimbabwe: Women's agency in Mtelo village, Zhombe, 2000-2017

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Abstract

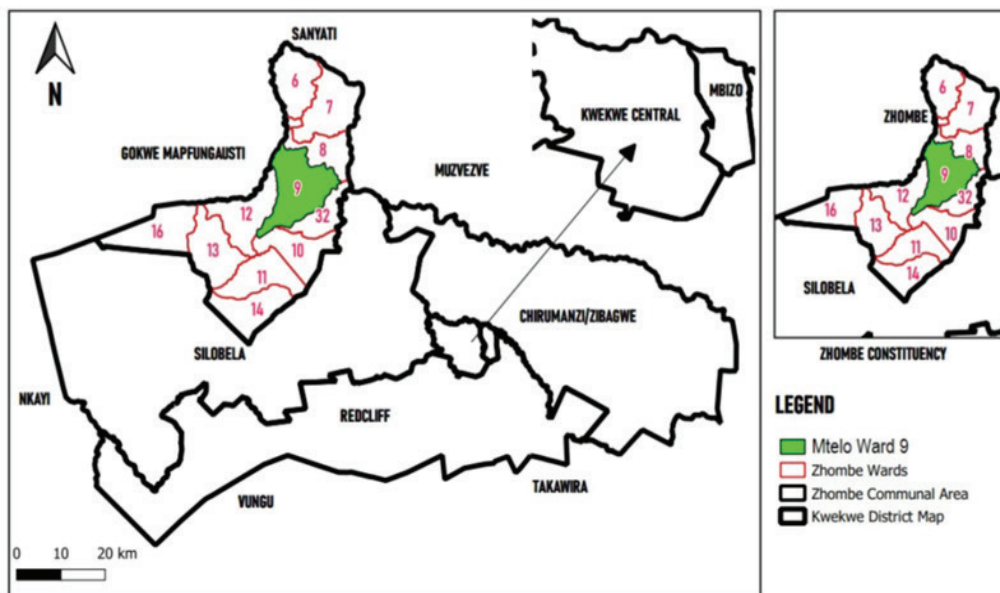
Water scarcity is a challenge for most drought-prone rural areas in Zimbabwe. It negatively impacts agricultural production and necessitates non-farm interventions to reduce food insecurity. This paper deals with a crucial topic in the field of gender studies, livelihoods and resilience in drought-endemic areas. Women in Mtelo exercised agency to address challenges that were posed by water scarcity to their livelihoods. While they exhibited agency, the paper contends that structural factors such as patriarchy affected the effectiveness of the women's agency. The significant body of literature and scholarship on women's agency and resilience to water scarcity in Zimbabwe's drought-risk districts such as Sanyati, Gokwe, Chivi and Gwanda, to name a few, demonstrates that women often came up with creative and sustainable ways to navigate water scarcity challenges to secure their livelihoods. The paper significantly contributes to existing literature on women's agency through examining the various ways women defied patriarchy to secure water for household use. Using a qualitative research approach, the paper examines various forms of agency utilised by women in the Mtelo community. It shows the heterogeneity of women and the differentiated impacts of social, economic and structural factors on women and men in Mtelo. The study finds and concludes that the livelihood problems faced by women in this rural area can be solved by their active participation in governance structures and through integrating gender-sensitive approaches in strategies to improve rural livelihoods. It thus provides a refreshing argument on women's agency and structural factors versus economic empowerment in the Mtelo rural community.

Keywords: Women, drought, rural livelihoods, agency, survival, Zhombe



Introduction

This paper examines women's agency, livelihoods, and resilience in drought-prone areas such as Mtelo, which are characterised by chronic water scarcity. Women in the Mtelo communal area, Zhombe (refer to Map 1), face numerous challenges stemming from limited access to water. Despite the complexities of water scarcity and its entanglement with broader community development issues, the entrenched patriarchal structures and institutions significantly influence the forms of agency available to women in this context. The study highlights how women demonstrate livelihood resilience through two distinct forms of agency: *adaptive agency*, which involves adjusting and navigating life within the prevailing community structures, and *critical agency*, which challenges and transforms socio-political and economic systems within Zimbabwe's predominantly patriarchal society. The Mtelo women are not passive victims of water scarcity but instead demonstrate both adaptive and critical agency through community participation, entrepreneurial strategies, and alternative livelihoods to confront water shortages and pervasive patriarchal power structures (Chipenda, 2024).



Map 1: Source: Adapted from Ministry of Lands, Agriculture, Fisheries, Water and Rural Development, reproduced by Cartographer Norman Mbizi, 15 October 2023.

Rural livelihoods across much of the developing world have traditionally been underpinned by agriculture and the utilisation of natural resources such as water, land, wildlife, and forestry products, including food, medicines, and timber. Women have historically played a central role in accessing and managing these resources, contributing significantly to rural livelihoods as providers of water, food, and other essentials within their households and communities. Despite this pivotal role, there is a notable gap in research addressing Zimbabwean rural women's agency, particularly the shift from *adaptive agency* to *critical agency*.

This paper moves beyond framing agency merely as a survival strategy by introducing the concept of *critical agency*, a transformative form of agency that allows women to challenge socio-political and structural constraints. The Mtelo women, for instance, are not passive victims of water scarcity. Instead, they demonstrate both adaptive and critical agency (Chiweshe, Lynch & Macleod, 2024), employing community participation, entrepreneurial strategies, and alternative livelihood approaches to confront water shortages and the pervasive effects of patriarchal power structures. These patriarchal systems shape household and community power dynamics, profoundly influencing the outcomes of women's agency (Karami et al., 2024).

A significant body of literature by Nyandoro (2020), Shumba (2021), Jaka and Shava (2018), Bhatasara (2022), and more recently, Chipenda (2024) and Mwamba et al. (2022), explores women's resilience and adaptive strategies to water scarcity in drought-prone regions such as Sanyati, Gokwe, Chivi, and Gwanda. This scholarship stress women's ingenuity in addressing water scarcity to sustain livelihoods in arid environments where agriculture remains a primary economic activity. Building on this foundation, this article uses a qualitative research approach to examine the agency of Shona- and Ndebele-speaking women in Mtelo. It also investigates how patriarchal power dynamics influence the strategies employed by women compared to men in addressing livelihood challenges caused by climate-induced drought and water scarcity (Chiweshe et al., 2024).

This study is rooted in a feminist analytical framework, positioning the women of Mtelo Village (Ward 9, Zhombe Rural District) as agents of change who challenged male dominance and patriarchal oppression. By exercising *critical agency*, these women resisted traditional norms and adopted economic innovations, community participation, and alternative livelihoods to enhance their socio-economic position amidst water scarcity and other structural

challenges (Mpako & Ndoma, 2024). The sustainable livelihoods approach (SLA) provides a nuanced lens through which the agency of women in Mtelo is examined, highlighting how institutional structures, resource utilisation, and available capital shaped the sustainability and effectiveness of their strategies (Nyandoro, 2018; Mwamba et al., 2022; Walsh, 2024). Mtelo women exhibit diverse approaches to addressing challenges, reflecting the heterogeneity of their responses to water scarcity. These include resilience through community participation, entrepreneurship, and innovative practices aimed at challenging patriarchal norms, in line with findings from Jaka and Shava (2018) and Bhatasara (2022).

Background to female agency in Zimbabwe

In pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial Zimbabwe, women played a pivotal role as primary producers of food. However, in patriarchal societies such as rural Zhombe, women were often relegated to subordinate roles compared to men (Nyandoro, 2007). Despite this subordination, since Zimbabwe's independence in 1980, women have displayed remarkable resilience and agency, challenging the entrenched patriarchal norms they perceived as detrimental. Women's agency became distinctly gendered, with women assuming active roles in both farming and non-farming activities, often in contrast to their male counterparts. A notable example of this agency is witnessed in Mtelo village, where women respond to drought and water scarcity by diversifying their livelihoods and engaging in non-farming activities to a greater extent than men. This trend is largely pronounced during periods of economic hardship, such as the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) of the 1990s and the severe drought of 1992 (Nyandoro, 2007). From the 1990s onwards, Zimbabwe faced financial and economic crises that disproportionately impacted rural areas, home to approximately 77% of the population (Nyandoro & Hatti, 2018).

In Mtelo, women endure the most of the country's crises, particularly during the peak of Zimbabwe's economic collapse in 2008 (Nyandoro & Hatti, 2018). Despite living in a water-scarce area, women continue to fulfil dual responsibilities aligned with gender-assigned roles as both providers and producers of food. In doing so, they exhibit *adaptive agency*, innovatively addressing the challenges posed by water scarcity. However, their effectiveness in navigating patriarchal structures is shaped by intersecting factors such as income, gender, age, and marital status (Chipenda, 2024). Many women in Mtelo turn to alternative livelihood activities such as cross-border trading, selling goods at artisanal gold mining sites, and even engage in commercial sex

work, activities that often draw scepticism from their society. While non-farming activities have historically existed, the growing informalisation of Zimbabwe's economy, driven by ESAP in the 1990s, the agrarian land reforms of the 2000s, and subsequent economic challenges, pushed more women in drought-prone areas, like Mtelo, to embrace alternative livelihoods. These activities became critical strategies for negotiating survival in an increasingly volatile economic landscape (Bhatasara, 2022; Mwamba et al., 2022).

Women's responses to these crises also highlight their ability to adapt and challenge traditional norms. For instance, women demonstrated *critical agency* by creating community-based strategies and employing entrepreneurial skills to diversify their income sources, which helped mitigate the impacts of water scarcity (Karami et al., 2024; Chiweshe, Lynch & Macleod, 2024). This resilience underscores the broader significance of women's agency in ensuring household and community survival amidst Zimbabwe's multifaceted economic and environmental challenges.

Literature Review

Agency and resilience of rural women in Zimbabwe

Rural women in Zimbabwe have historically played a critical role in the collection and management of water despite significant barriers, including patriarchal structures, gender-based inequalities, and restricted access to resources and services. *Agency* refers to the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and take actions to shape their lives. For rural women, agency often operates within cultural, social, and economic constraints but also manifests in resourcefulness and adaptation to water scarcity. Studies by Ngwenya and Dube (2020) and Chirwa and Ndhlovu (2018) highlight how women, constrained by unreliable rainfall, inadequate infrastructure, and competition for water, displayed remarkable resilience. Practices such as rainwater harvesting and digging wells in dry riverbeds, despite physical risks, demonstrate how women utilised local ecological knowledge and social networks to mitigate the effects of water scarcity. This resilience is further explored through the *Sustainable Livelihoods Framework* (Chigumira, 2020), which considers natural, social, human, physical, and financial capital. Women's adaptation strategies include innovative water management practices, leveraging social networks, and advocating for improved infrastructure. These efforts underline women's critical role in sustaining livelihoods in the face of persistent challenges. Madzimore (2024) examines women's actions in Mtelo, which include lobbying government

officials, engaging the media, reviving rain-petitioning ceremonies, and raising awareness of their rights to water and gender equality.

Scholars like Jaka and Shava (2020) and Chigumira (2020) have also explored how intersectionality, that is, factors such as gender, poverty, and environmental stress—shapes women's resilience strategies in rural Zimbabwe. For example, Chitiga-Mabugu and Karanda (2021) analyse how climate change impacts women's socio-economic roles, while Mutopo (2021) focuses on women's post-land reform roles in agriculture and livelihoods. Musemwa (2023) studied how socio-political factors influence water scarcity adaptation, offering insights into how women in communities like Mtelo have coped. These contributions complement the current study, revealing that Mtelo women's resilience challenged narratives suggesting rural women's inability to overcome water scarcity and poverty without male support. On the other end Nyandoro (2019) provides a broader perspective, analysing water scarcity across southern Africa and proposing long-term solutions to climate-induced droughts. His earlier work (2007) engaged community-based strategies, particularly in drought-prone areas like Sanyati, where women assumed leadership roles to mitigate environmental risks. Madzimore (2024) extends this focus, specifically examining water scarcity and livelihood challenges in Mtelo, highlighting how women utilised adaptive and critical agency to confront patriarchal barriers and sustain their communities.

Studies by Bhatasara and Chiweshe (2020) explore how women in climate-vulnerable areas adapted to drought, offering key insights into gender and environmental dynamics. Similarly, Manyonganise (2021) discusses how patriarchal systems influence women's leadership and agency, resonating with the analysis of resilience and gender relations in Mtelo. Moyo and Chambati (2019) examine the impact of land reform on women's agency and access to resources, an issue central to understanding Mtelo women's struggles.

The literature reveals gaps that this paper addresses, such as the nuanced ways in which patriarchal systems informed livelihood strategies adopted by men and women, while showing how structural factors constrained women's agency in Mtelo while also enabling them to assert critical agency. Despite male dominance in decision-making and resource control, Mtelo women actively resisted and adapted, showcasing their resilience in a patriarchal and resource-scarce environment (Madzimore, 2024).

The challenges of patriarchy

Patriarchy in Mtelo and adjacent communities deeply influence women's access to resources and decision-making power. Women are excluded from land ownership and decision-making processes that influence community water supply and management, despite these being critical to their livelihoods. They cultivated land but could not own it, as land rights were predominantly reserved for men under colonial and patriarchal systems (Campbell, 2003; Madzimure, 2024). Manyonganise (2021) explores how patriarchal systems marginalised women's leadership and agency in rural communities. Similarly, Moyo and Chambati (2019) examined how land reform policies affected women's livelihoods and access to resources. These studies highlight the structural challenges faced by women in patriarchal systems and the resilience required to navigate these constraints. Mtelo women negotiate access to land and water through asymmetrical power relations, often engaging in hierarchical structures dominated by men (Madzimure, 2024). Yet, they actively resisted these limitations, employing strategies such as advocacy, social networking, and alternative livelihood activities. Despite systematic exclusion, their efforts underscore the complexity of negotiating agency within patriarchal systems.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach rooted in a case study design. Mtelo village, located in the Zhombe communal area, was purposefully selected due to its distinct water scarcity issues compared to nearby villages such as Hlomula, Tabagwisa, Mbuva, Mbazula and Manyosi. The lack of a borehole in Mtelo highlighted its unique situation, making it a compelling case for examining water scarcity and its implications on livelihoods.

Data was collected through oral interviews, field observations, and a review of related literature. Key interview respondents were selected for their knowledge and lived experiences related to water scarcity and livelihoods. Research participants voluntarily consented to participate after being assured of confidentiality and were informed that the data would be used exclusively for the study. Ethical clearance and permission to conduct the research were obtained from the Zibagwe Rural District Council, the Kwekwe District Council, Chief Gwesela, and the Councillor for Ward 9.

The qualitative data collected was systematically analysed by identifying similar codes and categories and grouping them into key themes. These themes included women's adaptive agency, critical agency, livelihood strategies, male

agency, and patriarchal hurdles. This thematic approach helped simplify the complexity of the data and ensured a structured way of addressing the research questions. To ensure validity and reliability, the study utilised triangulation by incorporating multiple data sources, including interviews, field observations, focus group discussions, and documents. Data collected from these sources were cross-checked to verify consistency and accuracy.

The study involved prolonged fieldwork to ensure an in-depth understanding of water scarcity and its effects in Mtelo village. To mitigate potential bias, interpretations of the data were revisited with participants to confirm alignment with their lived experiences and to validate the conclusions drawn. Detailed contextual descriptions are provided, enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings to other similar contexts. For example, the study delves into the challenges faced by women within a patriarchal framework as they sought to diversify livelihoods. These detailed accounts can aid in determining the transferability of the findings to comparable settings.

Results

Complexities of Mtelo women's agency within a patriarchal framework

This paper used the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework to analyse Mtelo women's agency to water scarcity. The SLF helped to situate the differentiated experiences of women and men in Mtelo. Socio-economic factors such as gender, age and financial resources contributed to Mtelo households' capacity to diversify their livelihood strategies in response to water scarcity. The assets available and accessible to everyone shape their ability and manner in which they coped with the stresses, and shocks, caused by water scarcity to their livelihoods.

Women in Mtelo adapted differently to the challenges posed by water scarcity because they had different forms of assets available to them. For instance, women from households that were well-off were active in cross-border trading. This was because the activity was capital intensive to facilitate the purchase of trade goods mainly in South Africa, Botswana and Zambia. The goods such as clothing, solar powered gadgets and groceries that were purchased in neighbouring countries were for resale in the village. Women who were involved in cross-border trade in the area also bought goods such as knitwear, seat covers, embroidery clothing and dried farm produce from fellow women in Mtelo to resale in South Africa (Interview with Anna Ndlovu, 13 May 2022). Knitwear, known in local Shona parlance as *madhoiri* (see Figure 2), became

popular since the early 1990s (Dzawanda, 2023; Mutopo, 2010). After selling knitwear especially in South Africa, Mtelo women in return brought back money, groceries and some goods to sell in the village.



Figure 1: Madhoiri made by Mtelo women for sale in South Africa, Botswana and Zambia (Source: Pictures by Edwick Madzimure, 2023.)

In Mtelo and the surrounding areas the average number of women involved in cross border trading was five out of seventy households. Apart from access to financial resources, it is crucial to highlight that cultural norms also restricted women from livelihood strategies that required mobility and temporary migration. Most women in Mtelo were not allowed by the male figures of their families to travel. Women who were not allowed by their husbands to do cross border trading between Zimbabwe and South Africa therefore made crafts for sale to those who were able to go to South Africa (Interview with Mrs Gumbo, 2022). This dynamic shows how structural factors made it difficult for some women to freely engage in a livelihood strategy of their choice, but they navigated through the system by selling wares to the women who had capacity and freedom to conduct trade in the diaspora (Interview with Mrs Matemera, 2022). This illustrates the differentiated impact of patriarchy on women in Mtelo. They were affected and reacted in different ways to reach the ultimate goal of survival in a water scarce environment.

Casual wage labour was a widely adopted strategy by women to cope with insufficient income and food shortages caused by drought and water scarcity in Mtelo village. Most women in the village particularly from low-income

households were actively involved in casual labour, which the local people referred to as *maricho* (Interview with Mrs Chinabe, 2022). Casual wage labour was a source of livelihood in most Zhombe communities where both women and men provided labour in exchange for food, second hand clothes and money (Chambati, 2019). During the farming season casual labour activities included land clearing, planting, weeding, applying fertiliser, harvesting, shelling, winnowing, and packaging of the grains (Interview with Netsai Gobo, 2022). However, the majority of these women did not independently decide on the budgeting of the income they earned from their labour (Interview with Mrs Mpande, 2022). The male figures of the household had the final decision on how the money that was paid in cash was used (Focus Group Discussion, 2022). Therefore, while significant strides were being made by women in Mtelo village to defy the challenges of water scarcity and drought, one cannot ignore how the interplay of men's dominance over women affected the independence and agency of women in the area.

Commercial sex work was also a survival and livelihood strategy that was adopted by some women in Mtelo. The category of women who actively engaged in commercial sex work used sex work as a means of acquiring money for their sustenance, for instance, to buy food, clothes as well as paying school fees (Interview with Chenai Gotori, 2022). However, commercial sex work was regarded as immoral and socially unacceptable, hence, the women who engaged in this activity often plied their trade away from their community and they invariably lied to their families about their real source of income (Interview with Tafadzwa Murenga, 2022). Because it is immoral, the engagement of women in commercial sex work has been seen by Motsemme (2007) as epitomising flawed agency. Motsemme uses the term 'flawed agency' to suggest that sex work constituted unconventional ways to achieve the intended financial security by women who engaged in that activity.

Additionally, women in Mtelo village resorted to seeking livelihood opportunities in artisanal mining sites. A field interview conducted on 16 January 2023 revealed that some women carried out alluvial gold mining along the Zhombe riverbank, while other women sold wares, cooked and sold food to male miners (Mrs Vikita, 2022). The women who were interviewed at Zhombe river indicated that they preferred to do alluvial gold mining during the rainy season and rubble mining during the dry season because it was not dominated by men who regulated how they operated unlike shaft or belt mining (Interview with Getrude Moyo & Muchanyara Shoko, 2022). During their menstrual cycle

women working in shaft and belt mining sites were not allowed near the mining shafts as it was believed to be a bad omen. Such traditional beliefs defined gender roles as well as shaping the agency exhibited by men and women in Mtelo.

Despite not having full autonomy and independence, women in Mtelo also use social capital to enhance their agency to water scarcity. This was evidenced by the formation of female-organised village groups. Through these groups the women in Mtelo village identify the parts of the river where they dig and get water during the rainy season. Through social networks women are also able to borrow water from the neighbouring households which had hand-dug wells that did not run dry in the dry season (Interview with Taurai Tshuma, 2022). The Councillor and village head are responsible for ensuring that there is access to water within the village. However, in most cases their effort is limited due to inadequate infrastructure and not enough support from the council. Inadequate water infrastructure, marked by the absence of boreholes and piped water, contribute to Mtelo women's vulnerability. Since Mtelo women face water challenges they innovatively take initiatives to respect the cultural and social expectations of a patriarchal system, though this contributes to their vulnerability, and they try to cope and adapt to the patriarchal setting in which they found themselves operating by making an effort to survive within the system while not openly attempting to change it. This was adaptive agency by the women of the area.

While it was remarkable that women in Mtelo village exhibited agency to the challenges posed by water scarcity, the adaptive agency exhibited by Mtelo women also exposes them to vulnerabilities wrought by pursuing double duties which included common household chores of cooking, cleaning and taking care of children. Due to the traditional gendered division of labour women in Mtelo endure the burden of household work and engage in several income generating activities. Nevertheless, as narrated by the studied Mtelo village women, although they tried, it was difficult in a patriarchal society to strike a balance between daily household chores like fetching water and carrying out other livelihood activities like artisanal mining and cross border trade (Focus Group Discussion, 18 July 2022).

Mtelo women navigating the patriarchal hurdles affecting their agency

The patriarchal system in Mtelo village and its surrounding areas plays a central role in shaping women's agency, alongside the challenges of drought and water

scarcity. While women navigate these hardships in a context dominated by male authority both at the household and community levels, they nonetheless resist excessive male control in various ways. During a focus group discussion conducted in Mtelo village in July 2022, many women revealed that although they often sought permission from their husbands, brothers, or fathers before engaging in economic activities (Focus Group Discussion, 18 July 2022). It was indicated that they occasionally challenge these norms. Participants reported that they defied restrictive patriarchal rules to pursue livelihood opportunities, such as selling goods at mining sites, within the village, and at local shopping centres. Observations during the research revealed that women engaged in diverse income-generating activities, including craftwork, cross-border trading, alluvial gold mining, and casual seasonal labour, even though societal norms prohibited women from leaving their homes for such pursuits (Riby, 2023; Fonjong & Zama, 2023).

Despite patriarchy being perceived as a significant barrier to women's economic empowerment, most married women in Mtelo negotiate with their male family members for permission to pursue livelihood opportunities, particularly in accessing land, a resource predominantly controlled by men. Similar dynamics have been highlighted by other studies. For example, women in Mwenezi District employed negotiation strategies to access land following the fast-track land reform programme of 2000 (Mutopo, 2011). This pattern reflects broader findings in patriarchal societies where relationships with men are often essential for women's access to land and other resources (Kaur, 2024). Despite these constraints, women in Mtelo demonstrated resilience by overcoming challenges such as lack of land and water scarcity. In the focus group discussion, approximately eighty percent of women indicated that male heads of households had to approve any livelihood activity before it could be implemented (Focus Group Discussion, 18 July 2022). This demonstrates how women's agency and resilience operated within and often against the limitations imposed by patriarchal and traditional societal structures (Cole et al., 2024; Kosovac & Grupper, 2024).

Structural forces play a crucial role in either enabling or constraining change. In Mtelo village and its environs, patriarchal systems significantly hinder women's survival strategies. At the household level, men owned property and retained the final authority over its allocation and use of resources and other factors of production. At the community level, positions of power are also monopolised by men. Consequently, these entrenched social structures grant

men with control over the means of production, often relegating women to adaptive agency. Although women in Mtelo displayed resilience by adopting survival strategies to combat drought and water scarcity, their efforts were often shaped by and confined within male-dominated decision-making frameworks (Nigussie et al., 2024; Mawani, 2024).

The dominance of men in Mtelo extended to the economic exploitation of women. While most women in Mtelo village and neighbouring communities recognised patriarchy as an inescapable reality, they demonstrated remarkable defiance to the system. They confronted challenges posed by patriarchy, drought, and water scarcity with resilience and adaptability, showcasing their ability to survive and thrive under adverse conditions. Women's strategies, while often constrained by structural forces, highlight their agency and capacity to resist oppressive systems and improve their livelihoods (Mutanda & Nhamo, 2024; Akurugu et al., 2021).

Comparing female and male agency in Mtelo village

In Mtelo village, social and cultural norms profoundly influence livelihood diversification strategies for both men and women. Women's choices were significantly shaped by the decisions of male figures in their households, reflecting entrenched patriarchal norms that governed access to resources and agency. The gendered division of labour further accentuated these differences, as women are primarily responsible for water collection, household chores, and supplementary income-generating activities, while men operated with fewer constraints (Mawani, 2024; Riby, 2023). This disparity stresses the systemic barriers that limit women's ability to independently pursue livelihood opportunities in drought-prone contexts.

The patriarchal framework in Mtelo restricted women's agency by binding it to male approval. For example, married women had to seek permission from their spouses before engaging in activities such as cross-border trading or vending. This dynamic was reinforced by societal norms that stigmatized women who attempted to act independently, often branding them as bad influences in community networks, such as church groups or women's associations (Interview with Sharai Dura, 2022). Men, in contrast, operated without such constraints, freely pursuing and benefiting from livelihood diversification strategies (Cole et al., 2024). This disparity in mobility and autonomy highlighted the structural inequities that shaped livelihood choices in Mtelo.

Men's greater access to resources and decision-making authority allow them to exercise significant agency within both the household and the community. In contrast, women have to navigate intersecting vulnerabilities arising from gender-based discrimination, water scarcity, and socio-economic marginalisation. The burden of household responsibilities, combined with the need to contribute to household income, increased women's labour demands disproportionately. This dynamic was particularly evident in water collection, which required significant physical effort due to the scarcity of nearby water sources (Nigussie et al., 2024). Such demands limited women's ability to fully participate in income-generating activities, further entrenching gender disparities in resource-scarce environments (Fonjong & Zama, 2023).

Despite these constraints, women in Mtelo exhibit adaptive and critical agency. Adaptive agency involves strategies to cope with immediate challenges, such as engaging in informal trade or artisanal mining. However, critical agency goes further to challenge the systemic conditions that perpetuated inequities. Women in Mtelo organised advocacy activities to highlight their water scarcity challenges, lobbying local councils for infrastructural improvements. While such efforts demonstrated resilience, they often did not extend to contesting women's exclusion from key decision-making roles, limiting the transformative potential of their actions (Mutanda & Nhamo, 2024; Kosovac & Grupper, 2024).

Gendered vulnerabilities also shaped individual responses to water scarcity and livelihood opportunities. Men's material relationship with water is less burdensome due to their limited involvement in water collection, enabling them to focus on economic pursuits. In contrast, women's daily interaction with water amplifies their exposure to the challenges of water scarcity. This dynamic aligns with Mackenzie's (2014) view of vulnerability as an ontological construct shaped by inequalities of power and capacity. Women in Mtelo endured the most of water-related vulnerabilities, while simultaneously contributing to household survival through unpaid labour and economic activities (Riby, 2023; Kaur, 2024).

Importantly, women's critical agency in Mtelo also involves efforts to redefine power dynamics. By advocating for the recognition of their unpaid labour and seeking representation in decision making platforms that influence community water supply and management discussions, women began challenging the patriarchal structures that underpinned resource allocation and governance. This shift from mere adaptation to transformation highlights the potential

for women in Mtelo to act as agents of systemic change, despite significant barriers. Such efforts align with broader findings that underline the importance of women's leadership in addressing climate-induced challenges and resource scarcity (Mawani, 2024; Cole et al., 2024).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has examined the multifaceted and interwoven factors that shape women's agency in Mtelo village under the constraints of water scarcity and entrenched patriarchy. The analysis revealed how gendered barriers significantly influenced women's ability to diversify their livelihoods and exercise decision-making power. Despite these constraints, Mtelo women demonstrated resilience and adaptability by pursuing alternative economic opportunities that often defied patriarchal norms and their socially constructed secondary status. Importantly, the women's agency was not homogenous; it was mediated by intersecting factors such as marital status, socio-economic conditions, and individual capacities to navigate structural and cultural limitations. These findings underscore how socio-cultural norms and restricted access to resources remain critical impediments to women's autonomy and influence over economic proceeds from their labour.

The study highlighted the urgent need for inclusive policies that amplify women's voices and ensure their meaningful participation in decision-making processes at household, community, and institutional levels. Women in Mtelo have shown potential, not only for survival, but also for initiating change, pointing to the importance of addressing structural barriers that inhibit their contributions. Policymakers, scholars, and development practitioners should strengthen initiatives aimed at dismantling patriarchal structures not just in Mtelo but across rural communities in Zimbabwe, where similar dynamics persist. By doing so, the agency of women can transition from merely reactive and survival strategies to transformative actions that secure gender equity in resource allocation and utilisation.

Moreover, interventions should adopt female-centred approaches that transcend the rhetoric of adaptation, focusing instead on sustainable and restorative practices that empower women and improve their socio-economic standing under adverse climatic conditions like those in Mtelo-Zhombe. Policies and programmes at both local and national levels must prioritise integrative social transformation to frame water scarcity as a collective community issue

rather than an isolated women's problem. This perspective broadens the scope of response and ensures shared responsibility for resource challenges.

Future studies may critically rethink the concept of agency, particularly its impact on fostering sustainable structural change in patriarchal and resource-scarce settings. Research employing intersectional approaches could illuminate how different categories of identity, such as age, marital status, or economic class, affect vulnerability and resilience among women. Such analyses would help develop nuanced strategies to address water scarcity and support equitable resource management in drought-prone regions of Zimbabwe and beyond.

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