

INVESTIGATING GENDER DIMENSIONS IN VENDING ACTIVITIES IN THE CITY OF MUTARE, ZIMBABWE

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Abstract

This study was carried out at Sakubva Market, popularly known as “Musika Wehuku or Chicken Market” in Mutare City, Manicaland Province, Zimbabwe. The study focused on gender dimensions of vending in terms of age, marital status, educational levels, types of goods sold, and length of experience in the trade as well as sources and levels of funding. A questionnaire survey, key informant interviews, field observations and document reviews were used as data collection tools. Results revealed a marginal dominance of men in vending activities. This was a departure from the commonly held notion of vending as a women’s activity. A notable trend, however, was the more recent entry of males into an activity formally perceived as female dominated. The men tended to vend durable items as opposed to food items. Vending provides the only source of income for the majority of vendors at Sakubva Market. With the economic and employment crisis deepening in Zimbabwe, most urban dwellers find vending and other informal activities as the sole source of livelihood. Mutare City Council has to integrate vending activities into the urban economy to achieve sustainable urban livelihoods.

Background to the Study

The term ‘informal sector or trade’ refers to employment and production that takes place in small, unregulated and/or unregistered enterprises (ILO, 2002; Chant, 1999). The informal sector provides half or more of total employment in developing countries. Its contribution ranges from 48% in North Africa, through 51% in Latin America, to 65% and 72% in Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa respectively (ILO, 2002).

According to the ILO (2002), over two-thirds of urban women in Africa take part in the informal sector mainly as vendors because the activity is in most cases the only option open to them to earn an income, while assuming the tasks related to their reproductive roles. This is because the informal sector blends very well with women's domestic reproductive roles due to its flexibility, low cost of entry and has low skill requirements (Cheng, 2005; Dang, 2002; Cohen et al., 2000). In Latin America, 58 % women non-agricultural workers are informally employed compared to 48 % of male non-agricultural workers; in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) the figures are 84 % for women in comparison to 63 % for men. In Asia, the number of men and women is roughly equal (ILO, 2002) and estimates for developed countries are around 15%. In addition the negative impacts of the HIV/AIDS pandemic have thrust on many women the new and unfamiliar role of breadwinner in many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (Mitullah, 2003). These women trade in different commodities ranging from food stuffs to pottery and woven goods.

Women, it has been noted, also take part in vending as a way of empowering themselves in a society that tends to be traditional and oppressive rather than liberal. This is because in many less developed countries (LDCs) when women depend on their husbands for financial assistance, they are placed in a weak bargaining position, as men assume a dominant role. Men often find themselves within the informal sector due to the negative effects of structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) that resulted in the downsizing of the civil service and the restructuring or closure of many companies (ILO, 2002). SAPs in many LDCs like Zimbabwe resulted in loss of employment and the shrinking of the formal job market, thereby creating conditions for the mushrooming of the informal economy.

The informal sector has also become the lifeline for many people in less industrialized nations, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, in terms of employment provision since it is increasingly becoming the key mechanism for coping with the growing population (Mupedziswa, 2001). Thus, while before 1991, the informal sector was seen as inferior and disorganized, the consequences of economic hardships faced by many people in SSA have turned it into a vibrant sector.

The informal sector in Zimbabwe was employing approximately 1.56 million people compared to the 1.26 million within the formal economy (Mupedziswa, 1999). Today unemployment figures often quoted are beyond 80% with a very visible vibrancy of vending activities in all of Zimbabwe's urban centres. Employment in the informal sector rose from 10% in 1980 to 40% of the total labour force in 2004 (UN Habitat, 2005). The informal economy had effectively become the mainstay for the majority of the Zimbabweans (ibid). International Labour Organization (2005) as quoted by The Zimbabwean (2005), however, reported that 3 to 4 million Zimbabweans earned their living through informal sector employment, supporting another 5 million people, while the formal sector employed about 1.3 million people (ibid). Compounding the effects of the deteriorating economic conditions is rural to urban migration, which started long, before independence and has accelerated during the post independent period. Only a small proportion of these migrants today find work in the formal sector. Zimbabwe's education system which expanded rapidly after independence churns out hundreds of thousands of youths per year such that the total labour pool increased from 3 to 5 million between 1980 and 1999, yet the formal job market could hardly absorb a third of these.

Therefore, the bulk of the unemployed population has sought opportunities in the informal sector, with more than half of them being women.

An important feature of the informal sector in Zimbabwe is vending. Vendors are those traders who operate from the streets or occupy legally distributed stalls at a given area selling different goods (Mitullah, 2003; Cohen et al., 2000). These range from traders in fruit and vegetables, to those selling crafted products, traditional herbs, pottery, sculpture, fabrics, cosmetics, flowers, kitchen-ware, stationery and at times electrical gadgets.

The market for vendors is largely the pedestrians. In a few cases, especially when they have done business in one spot for a long time, customer relations develop, thereby expanding the market beyond the general pedestrians. Some vendors look for customers in offices, homes and beyond the urban areas where they are based. This is quite dominant among those who have invested substantially in street trade, especially those who use trucks, pick-ups and bicycles. Such vendors trade in cooked food, fruits, vegetables and clothes. Overall, however, high transport costs and low profits prohibit street traders from accessing alternative and better markets (Mitullah, 2003; Motala, 2002; Cohen et al., 2000). Market relations are usually mutual, except in cases where there is intense competition among street vendors. Poor location of business, low purchasing power among customers and unreliability of customers who take goods on credit also affects the market. In addition, low levels of professionalism due to low technical education among vendors and low access to modern information communication technologies on productivity information hinders their performance in business marketing (Motala, 2002).

In recent years the number of people participating in vending activities in Zimbabwe has increased and so have the gender aspects of people who are participating in such activities. The general belief is that women dominate vending activities. Women, it has been argued, take part in vending more than men due to the erosion of the purchasing power of the male breadwinner, increasing male unemployment, loss of spouses due to HIV/AIDS, declining fertility, and gender related limitations associated with them such as lower educational levels and limited access to vocational training (Chen et al., 2005; Mitullah, 2003; ILO, 2002). Moreover, men tend to join street trade at a younger age and leave early for formal employment whereas women take part in it on a full time basis especially in developing countries like Zimbabwe. Gender disparities within this sector also emanate from the fact that male traders invest in businesses that require high capital and also yield more profits such as car repairs whilst women venture into low-income trade such as street vending. This paper examines the socio-economic conditions of vendors in Mutare and the perceived gender imbalances in vending activities, and the implications for sustainable urban livelihoods.

Description of the Study Area

Sakubva high density suburb is in Mutare, the fourth largest city in Zimbabwe, after Harare, Bulawayo and Chitungwiza respectively. Mutare is situated some 265 km to the southeast of the capital, Harare. Sakubva, the oldest high density suburb of the city of Mutare, is severely overcrowded and has extraordinary squalid conditions that pose a serious health hazard. These conditions contrast sharply with those in low-density suburbs such as Murambi, Fairbridge Park, Greenside, Morningside and Palmerstone, which are all located to the north and north east of the CBD. Mutare has one of the

highest urban growth rates in Zimbabwe. According to the 1982 census Mutare had a population of 69,621 but by 2002 the city's population had more than doubled to 170,106 (CSO, 2004) Due to the melt down of Zimbabwe's economy, unemployment has skyrocketed in Mutare like in the rest of Zimbabwe's urban centres. Consequently most of the city's residents try to make a living through vending and other informal sector activities.

Research Methodology

The research was a non- interventionist descriptive survey of vending activities at Sakubva's two main markets. Primary data was gathered directly from the vendors through the use of a questionnaire survey, comprising both open and closed questions, as well as formal and informal interviews as primary data collection methods. Field observations were also used.

The target group comprised vendors at the two Sakubva Markets. The Mutare City Council register for the vendors at the two Sakubva Markets indicated 350 vendors. During the period of study between August 2006 and March 2007 the number averaged 120 vendors and an 83.3 % (100 out of 120 vendors) simple random sample of both women and men was selected. The study of vendors presented challenges as the traders were highly mobile in search of customers or were constantly pushed out of business through a drop in the clientele base. The collected data were summarized in form of tables for easy of analysis and interpretation.

Results and Discussion

Socio-economic Conditions of Vendors

Research results established several socio-economic conditions related to the ages of vendors, marital status, and level of education attained, family size, and duration of involvement as vendors, types of goods

sold and reasons for choosing these goods. Fifty-five percent of the sample was male whilst the rest were women. The modal class age group of vendors who were interviewed was between 21-40 years.

Table 1 Percentage Age –Sex Distribution of Vendors

Gender	<20 Years	21-40 Years	Over 40 Years	Total Percentage
Male	5	35	15	55
Female	5	25	15	45

As indicated in Table 1, 5% each of both the female and male respondents were less than 20 years. There was dominance for both sexes of the 21- 40 years age group, although males (35%) were marginally more than the females (25%). There was parity for both sexes in the number of vendors older than 40 years (15% for each).

The modal age for both sexes coincides with the economically active population, the group that is responsible for supporting the young and old population. Under normal circumstances the economically active male group identified in this study would have been employed by the industry, but since the SAPs decade there have been massive retrenchments associated with closure, downsizing or downscaling of productive activities. These findings confirm earlier analyses of and views on the impact of SAPs (Mitullah, 2003; ILO, 2002). Most of these men find themselves with virtually nil prospects for getting formal employment and have to resort to vending for their survival and that of their families. Women vendors find the trade as the sole source of income since only 15% had working spouses.

Another socio-economic condition of vendors at the Sakubva Markets that was considered was marital status. Results indicated that 55% of the sampled vendors were married: 25% of the men and 35% of the women. Twenty percent of the men and five percent of the women were single. None of the men were divorced whereas 5% of women were. While 10% of the female vendors were widowed, only 5% of the male vendors fell into the same category.

Table 2: The marital status of respondents by gender (%)

	Married	Single	Divorced	Widowed	Total (%)
Male	25	20	-	10	55
Female	35	5	5	10	45

Although the marital status of vendors differed, a number of common characteristics emerged from the widowed and divorced parents. Firstly, they all have children to look after and a large proportion had additional dependants. Secondly, some widowed and divorced vendors do not have any other form of support from their relatives, welfare or donor organisations. Finally, being the heads of the families both the divorced and widowed men and women carry double burdens of being both father and mother in the home. Their social conditions drive them into vending activities.

None of the single vendors had children. Ten percent of the men had between 3-5 children whereas 15% had over 5 children. Women who had between 3 and 5 children constituted 20% and only one claimed to have 7 children. Among the vendors who had children, 30% of the men had children who did not go to school compared with 25% of the women. The rest of the respondents had minors who had not attained school going ages.

The daily average earnings of most vendors were not indicated, as most of them (60%) did not feel obliged and comfortable in disclosing their earnings. However, 25% of the

men got at least an average of Z\$100 per day on busy days. None of the women were eager to disclose such information although 15% indicated that they got on average less than of Z\$100 per day. In real terms earnings were very low to sustain an average urban family of 6.

A significant 10% of the women vendors never went through formal education. All the men received formal education although none reached tertiary level. Ten percent of these men had primary school education while the other 45% left school after completing their “O” Levels. As for the women, 5% had primary school education while the remaining 30% left school after having attended secondary school. However, 10% of those who attended secondary school were school dropouts who left before completing their “O” Levels.

The main reason behind low educational levels was poor family background where parents could not afford the fees, a reason cited by 30% of the sample. Another reason, given by 30% of the vendors, for the low level of education attained by most vendors, especially women, was related to societal discrimination based on traditional beliefs. The father would claim that he could no longer afford to send a girl child to school because they were not a valuable asset in the family since they would eventually marry and leave home. The male dominated culture therefore, promoted gender bias and gave preferential treatment to sons. Others were forced into early marriages so as to provide for their poor families, while a few failed to proceed with their studies because of early pregnancies which affected 45% of the respondents. Forty percent of the vendors, both men and women, dropped out of school because their poor performance in school did not warrant further allocation of limited financial resources. This was the dominant reason for those

men who dropped out at primary level. The overall impression that emerged was that parents used this excuse to wriggle out of their responsibility and obligation.

Duration of involvement as vendors between men and women differed greatly:

Table 4: Duration of Involvement in Vending (Years)

	0-2 Years (%)	3-5 Years (%)	6 Years + (%)
Males	35	10	10
Females	10	5	30

Vending was a relatively new phenomenon among men (35%). They turned to vending because employment prospects within the formal job market were severely limited. The other 10% of the men have been trading as vendors for the past 3-5 years, whereas only 10% have been there for over 10 years. These were mainly the victims of structural adjustments and the concomitant retrenchments, and were aged above 40. In contrast only 10% of the women are quite new in the field of vending (these are the youngest of the women vendors interviewed), 5% had spent between five to nine years and 30% have been vending for the past ten years or more. The greater number of women who had spend more years in the vending business supports the notion that women's employment is concentrated in the informal sector (Chen et al., 2005; Mitullah, 2003; ILO, 2002). This trend emanates from the lack of opportunities by women to be employed in the formal sector, largely because they have little education which further marginalizes them. The interesting scenario out of this is the rapid invasion of the female domain by women and the likelihood of complete displacement with deteriorating economic environment.

Types of Goods Sold by Vendors

Vendors at the two Sakubva Markets sold different types of goods. Ten percent (10%) of the male vendors traded in fruits and vegetables as compared to 20% of the women who

traded in the same commodity. These products range from tomatoes, mangoes, bananas, apples and plums, potatoes, spinach, cabbages, butternuts to corn. Most of these commodities are seasonal and thus are subject to availability and demand. Twenty percent of the vendors sold potatoes sourced from the surrounding farms up to a distance of 100km.

Vendors complained facing challenges such as rotting of products during periods of low demand. When demand was low for perishables, prices were reduced or they took the products and used them at home. This led to great losses. Other goods that were sold by vendors were clothes (20% and they are all male-Table 5). These sold items often found at flea markets. These ranged from shoes, belts, caps, T-shirts to jeans. Most of these were brought from as far as Mozambique, Harare and South Africa. The reasons given for trading in these items was that demand is high and so were the profits.

Fifteen percent of the products sold were herbs, all sold by women. These were traditional medicines traded by those ordained by the ancestral spirits to heal people. These products were brought from rural areas by bus and delivered to the traders. Pottery was also among the type of products sold by vendors. Those who sold pottery products were 5% of the sampled population. This line of trade was a major source of income since there was a ready market. However, vendors encountered problems such as competition, price hikes by suppliers and limited demand in mid-month periods. Vendors also sold a variety of goods (miscellaneous). They traded in a variety of products ranging from tobacco, pots and tins made from scrap metal, building materials, plumbing materials, woven goods as well as groceries such as sugar, cooking oil to flour which were scarce on the formal market.

Table 5: Types of Goods Sold by Gender

Types of goods sold :	No of Males	Males (%)	No of Females	Females (%)
Fruit and vegetables	10	10	20	20
Clothes	20	20	0	0
Herbs	-	-	10	10
Pottery	-	-	4	4
Miscellaneous	5	5	1	1

Vending and Poverty Alleviation

Among those vendors who were married, no males had spouses working in the formal job market. Fifteen percent of women, in comparison, had working spouses and they practised vending as a way of augmenting the family's income. This was necessary because these men were involved in formal employment which was not highly rewarding, thereby earning incomes failed to sustain life and reduce poverty. Forty percent of these men were employed as security guards, 20% as seasonal (contract) workers at the nearby industries, with only a few employed in better economic sectors such as banking. The incomes were generally low. As a result, women traders find themselves vending business to help boost family incomes and thereby reducing poverty.

In addition the women claim that their earnings are much higher than their husbands' because on busy days they can earn, within a day, as much as what the husband earns during an entire month. This is especially evident during the end of the month when there

is a high customer turn up and during the end of the year as people prepare for the festive season holidays. Notwithstanding this difference in earnings, the burden of family upkeep lies heavily on the shoulders of the women. Women are therefore vulnerable to poverty despite the fact that their husbands are employed.

Men also confirmed that vending was a good source of money in an economy that has largely become informal. Proceeds from these vending activities helped families to reduce household food poverty levels. Formal employment in an environment of escalating inflation (7500% in the month of July, 2007) has become a nightmare for the majority of workers. Among the chief reasons they found themselves in the informal sector included the need to support families on realistic incomes (25%), expiry of contracts (5%), 20% left their jobs because the salaries were low and the general attractiveness of the informal sector. Comparatively women also owned up to having low paying jobs before vending such as voluntary work which, however, they left for reasons different from those of men. These included quitting their jobs because they wanted to get married whilst a third said the money was not good enough. The money generated out of vending was not adequate in real terms but the availability of it on a daily basis is good attraction for most vendors.

Vending is important in poverty alleviation. It acts as a major source of employment for most urban residents in Africa. In Zimbabwe, vendors *accounted* for 13% of the informal job opportunities and had a significant contribution to the urban and national economy. In Zimbabwe, street vending falls within the category of small to medium scale enterprises (SME) which provides employment and income to about 70 per cent of Zimbabwe's population, especially in urban areas. In the year 2002 alone, the SME sector employed

about 5,086,400 people up from 4,624,400 in 2001 (Mupedziswa and Gumbo, 2001; ILO, 2002). This represented an increase of 462,000 persons, and constituted 74.2 per cent of total national employment. The informal sector continues to attract males, particularly in vending activities, and constitutes a departure from the perceived gender characteristics of those who participate in vending activities. A new national thrust has to be taken in studies of vending activities with a view to unravel the gender dynamics of the emerging patterns. As these people get employed, they will have a source of income thereby partly alleviating poverty.

Gender Composition of Vendors

That results showed more males than females vendors is contrary to literature findings where women are said to dominate this sector. The major reason observed for the Sakubva finding is that most men find themselves in the vending business as a result of retrenchments. Most of these men have been staying in Sakubva for a long time.

Another reason is that the nature of jobs done by most of these men such as being security guards and industrial labourers were not well paying so they found vending a better alternative. Women on the other hand concentrate on house work such as being housemaids and baby-sitters in nearby suburbs. Most of the men who were interviewed indicated that their wives were not employed within the formal sector but elsewhere. Twenty percent of these male respondents indicated that they decided against their wives joining the vending trade because in cases of downturns on the market, they will at least have some form of income.

Assistance from the Social Welfare Officials

The Social Welfare Department in Mutare did not give assistance to vendors during the time of study. This is because according to the Public Assistance Act of 2002, the Social Welfare Department is not allowed to help informally employed people, as they are not regarded as an important part of the economy. Another reason that was given by the Department for not assisting vendors was that it is poorly funded by the State.

In spite of this position, the Department of Social Welfare receives about 99, 5% of applications from vendors at Sakubva Market alone who, however, are not considered. The department indicated that within the year 2005-2006 only, 65% of those who visited their offices were women. Fifteen percent of these were single mothers, 25% widows, 29% divorced and 31% married women. Out of the whole group of vendors who sought assistance from the Department of Social Welfare, Sakubva contributed about 45% on average. The Department gave several reasons for the large difference between men and women applicants. Women usually have custody of children after the death of a spouse and in the event of divorce. In most cases they will not have any other source of income since there are high levels of unemployment among women. Another reason is that women are much more vulnerable to inequalities in society which include lack of access to finance and land, as well as inheritance rights. In addition they have lower levels of education and lack information about women's rights.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

Women are still marginalized in the educational systems in most African countries. Only limited numbers of women gain qualifications in the higher levels of education leaving the majority at the bottom of the ladder. The majority of these women, therefore, find it

practically impossible to compete in the formal job market because of their low levels of education. Therefore finding self-employment in the informal sector is the only viable alternative, hence vending.

As for men the issue of lack of education is not of major concern since they get greater educational support than women. The Sakubva study, however, showed that men contributed a larger percentage of vendors. The major reason is that although most of them had attained secondary education very few jobs were available on the formal sector. It must be pointed out; however, that statistics on the informal economy are unreliable since the sector is very dynamic and has also not been fully researched and documented. Available information, however, is relevant and provides a broad picture of the sector.

Policies pertaining to vending activities in Zimbabwe are still weak and largely inadequate. For the past decade, such policies in Africa in general and Zimbabwe in particular have been ineffective in addressing informal sector issues. This is mainly because most, if not all policy-making institutions lack adequate knowledge about the contributions that can be made by the informal sector to the economy. As a result the importance of the sector is not fully appreciated. This is clearly indicated by the fact that in 2005 the Zimbabwean Government implemented an ill-conceived policy dubbed ‘The Clean Up Operation’ which destroyed all structures that were regarded as illegal. Many of these structures were for informal sector activities. Out-dated policies, which are retrogressive serve no useful purpose and should be thrown into the dustbin of history. Most of the vendors are not aware of the municipal by-laws governing their operations and thus education is needed on the respective laws, policies and regulations.

Recommendations

- Vendors should form associations they can use to voice their grievances to Council and other interested parties such as relevant government ministries and agencies. Strong associations or organizations will be helpful in influencing changes that address the interests of vendors. The associations can also be very useful when it comes to securing finances, since the associations can be used as collateral.
- The Mutare City Council and the Ministry of Small and Medium Scale Enterprises should involve or consult the vendors concerning policies and by-laws that affect them. Dialogue is very important because if the vendors are consulted they will not resist new policies or by-laws. This will help to avoid and/or reduce conflicts or confrontations between the vendors on the one hand and the Council and government on the other hand.
- There is an immediate need for government to revise the out-dated Town and Country Planning Act and bring it in line with the social, economic and cultural realities facing informal sector traders who are in reality the urban poor.
- New, humane policies, which will provide a conducive business environment for medium and small-scale enterprises, vendors included, and are applicable, should be formulated. The vendors should be involved or be consulted during the formulation of such new policies.
- Some of the vendors also need to get further education or training, to equip them to run their small businesses more effectively.

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