

Applicability of the Growth Point Policy in Addressing Women Socio-Economic Empowerment Issues; Case of Tsholotsho District, Matebeleland North Province, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The main focus of this study was to establish and understand the role of the growth point policy in promoting of women's socio-economic empowerment in Tsholotsho District, Matebeleland North Province, Zimbabwe. An exploratory research design was adopted in this qualitative study since it afforded participants a platform to narrate their experiences with regards to the applicability of the growth point policy to women's socio-economic empowerment. The target population included women from both the Centre and the Villages as well as key informants from government departments. Key informant interviews and focus group discussions as well as non-participatory observations were employed as methods of collecting data. Purposive sampling was used to come up with the research participants and data was collected from government officials, traditional leaders, NGOs working in Tsholotsho district as well as women from the centre (growth point) and from the hinterlands (villages). A sample size of 30 took part in the study. The study found out that the growth point strategy has been instrumental in positively transforming the lives and livelihoods of women in Tsholotsho but on piecemeal and minute levels of development. The study recommends that the policy be revisited and re-engineered in order meet the desires and aspirations of women in the rural sector. Secondly, the government and its partners should do more to capacitate women economic activities. Lastly the study recommends that the future research should focus on what the growth point policy that takes women issues into context.

Keywords; growth points, women empowerment, KIIs, FGDs, Centre(C), Village (V)

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

There is no tool for development more effective than the empowerment of women, these are the words of former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan emphasising the importance of women's participation in development initiatives. Globally, issues of empowerment of women and in particular, rural women have been discussed and addressed extensively. Studies

by (Mungwini, 2001; Kabeer, 2005; ILO, 2019; Mandinyenya, 2014) among others have shown that women are amongst the poorest group, particularly in the rural sector. They lack access to critical capital assets to enable them to participate in the national economy. The harsh conditions characterising the rural sector, Mungwini (2001) together with their varying roles, render women vulnerable in their quest for socio-economic development. Naturally, several development interventions have been formulated and implemented to try and extricate women from the quagmires of poverty. The growth point strategy is one such policy adopted by the Zimbabwean government in 1980 to transform rural communities. Even though it was formulated to address the developmental challenges faced by the general rural population, this study argues that the provisions within the growth point policy have the potential to transform the lives and livelihoods of women in the rural sector. Consequently, the under-development of the socio-economic structures within this sector are more experienced more by women than men. Previous studies have largely focused on the growth point policy without linking it to women's socio-economic empowerment. Henceforth, this study established the extent to which women have been empowered through the growth point policy.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Women in Tsholotsho face high poverty levels. They lack access to the socio-economic capabilities for the socio-economic development compared to men who are better positioned within patriarchy (Gaidzanwa, 2011). The growth point policy implemented in 1980 for rural development was expected to address issues that were in part critical for women empowerment. However, more than 4 decades later, the rural space still lack development. The growth point strategy has failed to be a catalyst for economic development of rural areas and therefore for rural women. The problem therefore is that the growth point policy as a strategy for rural development has not been effective and successful in promoting women's economic development in the rural sector. Studies carried out thus far have been silent on the assumed impact of the growth point policy on women's socio-economic development. This study brought to the fore the potential that the growth point has in achieving women empowerment based on the following research question;

1. To what extent are the interventions by the growth point policy effective in women's socio-economic empowerment?
2. How are the provisions of the growth point applicable to women in the rural sector?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Globally, the subject of the growth point/pole concept has contributed much to the economic growth discourse for distressed regions and rural areas. Several researchers and proponents have analysed this concept to establish its strengths as an economic growth intervention strategy for under-developed areas. Conceptualised by French Economist Francoise Perroux in the 1950s, other proponents of the concept such as Boudeville (1950), Hansen (1979), Todd (1974), Myrdal (1957), Hirschman (1958), Lasuen (1973), Hansen (1968), Hermansen (1967), Richardson (1975) and Paelinack (1965) among others have modified, added on, supported and critiqued Perroux's idea over the years. The same concept has also contributed immensely to the development of the growth point policy in Zimbabwe and has been extensively written on by geographers and development practitioners such as (Wekwete (1991, 1987, 1988), Manyanhaire et al. (2001; 2009; 2011), Nhede (2013), Chirisa, Dumba (2011), Moyo et al. (1985), Mutenga and Namasasu (1985), Gaspers (1998), Nyandoro (2007; 2017) and Mushuku

and Takuva (2013). Past and current studies have tried to explain why the strategy has not been successful and effective for regional economic development.

Europe and Latin America adopted the concept of the growth pole policy in the 1960s, but later abandoned it citing unattainable results (Bradford & Kent, 1987). Illustrative case examples include the USA which implemented the policy in the 50s but abandoned it later as it failed to achieve the desired results as investment was spread too thinly to a lot of centers (Manyanhaire et al. 1997). In the USA, Bradford and Kent (1987) state that the reason why the growth pole policy failed is that the government focused on investing in the worst developed areas thereby leading to the continual absorption of investment without achieving sustained growth and development as targeted. To this end, failure to institute proper supportive planning strategies and government policies largely contributed to the failure of the programme in many countries across the globe (Mashuku & Takuva, 2013). Conversely, even though the concept was largely adopted by many African governments at independence, it has remained at the back of rural development policies hence there is a need to explore the reasons for the failure and continual adoption of this policy in African countries.

In Africa, countries like Tanzania, Kenya and Libya followed suit, also adopted it but later dropped it due to failure to achieve tangible results. Tanzania abandoned it for its socialist policy Ujamaa that was viewed as having more benefits than the growth point's strategy. Hwang (1975) and Gantsho (2008) questioned whether the concept had a favourable impact on the welfare of rural areas and Africa in particular. Conyers (2001) cited in Manyanhaire et al. (2009), concedes that for the concept to have a positive impact on rural communities, necessary conditions should be in place, which is the right mix, comprising of planning, formulation and resource base identification. To this end, the growth point policy was not successful in these and other countries since they failed to avail the conditions in question and naturally compromised the socio-economic status of the receiving population, particularly women in need of the intervention more than men.

Zimbabwe adopted the growth point policy at its independence in 1980 as a way of bringing development to the rural sector and addressing regional imbalances that had been instituted by the colonial government (Wekwete, 1997). It is important to note that the concept was initially conceived in Zimbabwe before independence through the Integrated Plan for Rural Development in 1978 by the colonial government and resulted in 10 growth points being identified for development (Conyers et al. 2001). The adoption of the designated areas for development, after independence, was done to ensure the reduction of regional inequalities. Overall, the strategy was to create socio-economic development for the general rural inhabitants through decentralisation versus centralisation as constraints to the success of growth points in Zimbabwe. Chirisa, Dumba and Dube (2013), assert that while growth points were anticipated to grow the economies as intended, they have otherwise grown and continued to grow demographically, amid the urbanisation craze in the country. The re-engineering or modification of the policy is therefore a necessity for achieving economic growth, (Manyanhaire, Rwafa & Mutangadura, 2011).

Women's Socio-Economic Status Following the Implementation of The Growth Point Policy

The growth point strategy as a policy has a direct connotation to rural communities and it therefore indirectly addresses women's issues as they are more represented in these communities than men. Women in the rural sector face several socio-economic challenges rendering them, vulnerable and disempowered. The World Bank (2012) claim that in sub-Saharan Africa, women's economic marginalisation existed since time immemorial and was largely underplayed by patriarchy. Women were economically active but they were mostly, not in positions to claim the proceeds of their labour or have them formally accounted for. A study by Moagi and Mtombeni (2020) concurs with this claim as they note that the oppression of women by men in Southern Africa depicted them as minors to the extent that their economic contribution remained obscure.

Komte (2015) describes the lack of women's participation in policy formulation as hindering their participation in economic development. Additionally, due to patriarchy, they lack a voice and have less productive resources, are often underrepresented in rural organisations and institutions for their socio-economic development (UNDP, 2012). Under representation in organisations and institutions had been discussed within the SLA framework where it is noted that one of the capital assets in the framework is the social capital. It encourages the formation of social networks that make contributions to the socio-economic development of the rural population. However, lack of participation by women in such networks is a drawback in their efforts to fully participate in the rural economy. Moreover, various interventions for women empowerment have not managed to improve their socio-economic status. Mandinyenya (2014) describes empowerment initiatives for women as lacking sustainability, hence they have remained poor. She also shares the same view as Komte (2015); they argue that lack of women empowerment is content specific as different people view it differently. Mandinyenya (2014) views it as a verification of their needs while Komte (2015) refers to policy formulation specific to women as critical for their socio-economic empowerment. Additionally, Mandinyenya (2014) views economic development as meaningful where the poor can identify their areas of intervention.

In Zimbabwe, as already indicated by Komte (2015); Mandinyenya (2014); Mungwini (2007) and Gaidzanwa (2011), the socio-economic status of women and men in rural communities during the colonial era led to the government's promulgation of many developmental policies in a bid to address the rural urban inequalities. Women's socio-economic empowerment is a critical element of rural development in Zimbabwe. The growth point policy is one policy for rural development that the government formulated in 1980 to address the regional inequalities that existed then. The policy was grounded on the socio-economic empowerment of the general rural population (Nhede, 2013) but in this context it is imperative to note that some of the provisions of the policy were addressing women issues as a group that is more challenged by the underdevelopment of rural areas. Naturally, the growth point policy was not directly promulgated for women's empowerment but for the general rural population. Wekwete (1999) outlines the intention of the growth points in Zimbabwe as aiming to bring the rural population into close contact with services and markets, thus forging linkages with the national economy. Women in rural areas still struggle to access high-value markets, they rely heavily on local traders and have little brand recognition. One of the key aspects of the growth point strategy was to avail platforms that increase access to markets, for example good communication

networks which fall under the infrastructural development. Naturally, the issue of markets has a direct impact on women's empowerment

In the same vein, Nhede (2013) contends that although the strategy was a complete failure, there are some successes recorded that include; rural electrification, bringing basic services closer to rural communities, markets, communication networks, new schools and health centres, vending stalls, small business enterprises, marketing Boards and housing among others.

With the recorded failures (growth point policy), it meant that the socio-economic development of women in rural communities remains static. Mungwini (2007) describes the socio-status of rural women as poor due to harsh conditions. To this end, it is apparent that the demise of the growth point policy has added to the already vulnerable position of rural women continually exacerbating inequalities.

Applying The Growth Point Policy in Addressing Women's Socio-Economic Empowerment Issues

To fully comprehend the issues of rural women empowerment, it is important to acknowledge the full diversity of their experiences in the context of the changing rural economy. The proponents for women empowerment and rural development include Mapuva (2015), UN Women (2008), Sen (1990), Chambers (1993), Manyahanire et al. (2011), Moser (2016), Chantt (1998), Kongolo and Bamgose (2002), Chikwanha-Dzenga (1999) and FAO (2002). They give different accounts and views that support and critique the perspectives. In this regard, the discussion focuses on the achievements of the growth point policy and the impact therefore on women's socio-economic empowerment.

Women and rural development issues in contemporary times are continuously gaining momentum as a result of the changing rural development discourse, UN Women (2008). Similarly, it is important to view the growth point policy as an enabler for women's empowerment in the context of the changing rural environment and the various complexities that have a direct impact on women's lives and livelihoods. Mapuva (2015) contends that rural development hinges on the dictates of the growth points. As such, the success of the growth points has great relevance to the economic growth of the rural population particularly for women, whose socio-economic development in the rural economy lags compared to men. Issues to do with vulnerability, lack of access to capital assets, institutions that are not pro-women empowerment as well as poor livelihood strategies and outcomes all describe the lives and livelihoods of rural women. Women's economic empowerment through the growth point policy in this context is largely dependent on the effectiveness of the growth points as cited by Mapuva (2015). Resultantly, where successes have been recorded women have also benefitted. The question as to what extent have women been empowered in rural communities arises which is the main instigator of this study. An answer to this question can only be deduced after establishing the state and success of the growth points in Zimbabwe and the impact on women's socio-economic empowerment. This answer is critical for this study in that it answers the research questions guiding the study as well as bringing up the lack of portfolio of literature that focuses on women empowerment through the growth points.

Sen (1990), notes that development entails freedom, the very freedom that rural-based women do not have. Through the growth point policy in Zimbabwe, economic freedom was to be achieved through the various interventions outlined in the policy such as decentralisation, urbanisation, industrialisation and infrastructural development. Moyo, Malinga and Sikhosana (2017) referred to decentralisation as empowering rural communities and assumed that it was a panacea for rural development. In this context, decentralisation by manufacturing companies for instance the establishment of Cotton and Grain Marketing Depots was taken as a bold move to lessen the burden of transport as well as markets to cotton and maize growers (Chigonda, 2010). The motive would do away with women having to travel long distances with their produce to access markets. As a matter of fact, growth points like Tsholotsho have over the years, witnessed some of these essential services closing or scaling down. Low agricultural production due to climatic change situations and lack of capacity has resulted in the decline in production in the agricultural sector and citing that, the growth points failed to industrialise for employment creation and promotion of forward and backward linkages. As a result, lives and livelihoods have been adversely affected and taken a toll on women whose main livelihood is agriculture.

The growth point policy's other major objective was to promote infrastructural development such as roads, skills development centres, health facilities, housing, water and sanitation facilities among others. The provision of such facilities would naturally promote the health and skills development of women in addition to bringing markets closer to them. By urbanising rural communities, it was envisaged that the facilities found in urban centres would also be availed to rural communities as women in urban areas fare better than rural-based women. The achievement, therefore of the growth point policy would put them at the same level ((Manyanhaire et al. 2001). This is why Chambers (1983) draws attention to rural development interventions having to put rural women first since they are the most marginalised group in society. Morser (2016) supports Chamber's view as he points out that women's access to socio-economic assets is situational taking into account that women in urban areas are better off economically and socially compared to women situated in rural areas.

The Zimbabwean government has, since independence, been committed to ensuring that rural women become aware of their social, economic, political, cultural and social rights, but developments after the land reform programme of the year (2000) have negatively contributed to the cause for women empowerment. Rural women are not equal partners in the development process in most developing countries. The focus on rural women empowerment calls for an understanding of the relationship between women and men in rural communities as well as that of urban-based (FAO, 2002). The Zimbabwean government did well at independence to recognise that women in rural communities of Zimbabwe lived under socio-political and cultural conditions that confined them to positions where they lived as appendages of men (Chikwanha-Dzenga, 1999). To redress this anomaly, rural development policies were treated as the panacea for women's empowerment. In this context, rural development programmes were meant to inherently strengthen the livelihoods of women living in rural areas but to this end, most, including the growth point policy have not been effective and successful in ameliorating the lives and livelihoods of rural women.

Factors Constraining Growth Points

As already alluded to, rural women's lives and livelihoods are characterised by poverty particularly in developing countries. Suttie (2019) notes that globally, extreme poverty continues to be a challenge in rural communities as an estimated 79% of those experiencing poverty live in rural areas. In essence, sub-Saharan Africa has remained the world's most rural region. In Asia, with structural transformation, rural people are benefitting from initiatives such as the Green Revolution that are an important aspect of sustainable livelihoods. This is in contrast with Africa where policies for rural development have not been effective in improving the lives and livelihoods of the rural population particularly women who are inherently vulnerable. In Latin America, only small pockets of rural poverty remain, as most societies have largely urbanised. Lipton (1982) points out that, living in a rural area increases a person's probability of suffering from poverty as they are most likely to be affected what is termed 'rurality'. However, Lipton (1982) generalised the impacts the socio-economic and political conditions of women in the rural sector. Their discussions focus on the general rural dwellers and overlooked the gender divide.

Women in Tsholotsho District experience lack of access to socio-economic capabilities for development. Their dependence on rain-fed agriculture has impacted negatively the livelihoods they depend on. The province lies in ecological region 4 and receives very low rainfall, is prone to floods and has poor soils. There are threats of displacement owing to floods which they do not possess the capacity to recover from such challenges. Policies for rural development must be inclusive as indicated in the SLA to achieve the intended goals (Cornwall, 2016). As such, the formulation and strengthening of the growth point policy in 1980 were assumed to address regional imbalances (Wekwete, 1998) but, as is the case with biases in economic and social policies have contributed to rural poverty by excluding women from the benefits of development. There is evidence, lives and livelihoods of women in rural communities have not changed in Zimbabwe even though one of the goals of the growth point development strategy is to create socio-economic empowerment to reduce rural-urban disparities (Chikwanha-Dzenga, 1999). Nhede (2013) supports this view citing the growth point aim of stimulating industrial growth and creating employment opportunities for the locals which in turn was going to improve the lives and livelihoods of rural communities including women. The study by Chikwanha-Dzenga, (1999) has argued that women have not been given the attention they deserve.

It has been noted that since independence rural development policies (such as the growth point policy) have pushed for the provision of infrastructure to successfully link the rural areas with the urban areas (Mapira, 1997) to facilitate development. This was also done to encourage growth in the growth points in the hope that the benefits of urbanisation would filter to the rural communities too thereby alleviating the plight of the poor (Chikwanha-Dzenga, 2005). The assumption was that these benefits would change the lives and livelihoods of the rural population, particularly women who have constituted a largely marginalised group since the pre-independence era. However, more than 4 decades after independence, provinces such as Matebeleland North have remained at the bottom of the national economic ladder as the growth points in the area, particularly Tsholotsho have not addressed the plights of the rural population and in this context, women (Gantsho, 2008).

The growth point centers were targeted at addressing some of the challenges that women encounter, by bringing opportunities for business and emancipation closer to their doorstep (Nhede, 2013). Chikwanha-Dzenga (2005) posits that the growth centers developed into bottomless pits that consumed national resources without any returns. Although the growth point policy had some significant gains as far as development is concerned, it largely failed to uplift the socio-economic conditions, not only of women but of the general rural population. The failure of this policy is attributed to several factors some of which include; the lack of a participatory approach that would ensure the inclusion of all stakeholders, lack of capital investments, poor infrastructure, unavailability of essential services and overreliance on agriculture.

The ineffectiveness of the growth point policy led to the government resorting to a welfare approach to rural development whereby some NGOs and other partners took over the development of rural areas mainly by giving handouts and embarking on unsustainable projects (Nhede, 2013). Mandinyenya (2014) observes that NGO intervention for women empowerment has created dependency and has changed the status quo of rural communities and women in general. In addition to that, NGO-led development interventions have been criticised for pushing foreign agendas that are dictated by the donor agencies or nations. Some of the development projects by NGOs in rural Zimbabwe bring development initiatives that do not address the real needs of women in underprivileged positions in rural areas. Thus, many rural women continue to be poor despite their role in ensuring food security through agriculture. To this end, the high poverty levels in the Tsholotsho district have resulted in over-reliance on NGO handouts (Save the Children, 2002), as the district records poor harvest yearly on an ongoing basis.

Manyanhaire et al. (2009), further assert that the growth point policy's aim included setting a wave for the modernisation of rural communities. Investors shun primitive areas in preference for the more modern ones (Mapuva, 2015). Tsholotsho district needs infrastructural development like roads, hospitals, communication and using platforms for attracting investors. In addition, modernisation has a direct impact on women who would enjoy the same facilities as those found in urban centres. Wekwete (1998) posits that the policy was well-received since it was an initiative that would change the lives and livelihoods of rural people. However, as cited by Chikwanha-Dzenga (1999), the growth point policy failed to achieve effective socio-economic empowerment in rural communities.

As mentioned, Nhede (2015) notes that for the policy to be effective, there was a need to promote the agro-business which the majority of rural residents rely on for their livelihoods. In addition, there was a need for participation by the consumers of the policy themselves. Musingafi, Kaseka and Chaminuka (2015) also believe that rural-based women are still living in poverty, many years after independence. Significantly, there is a need for development initiatives that ensure that women are adequately compensated for their different social roles that contribute to development, in different ways, no matter how small. It should however, be recognised that some women empowerment programmes by NGOs have borne fruit as illustrated by the success of NGO-led development programmes that strengthened women's farming activities in Magunje growth point. Women's empowerment through developing rural growth point centers however remains a debatable issue. It has been noted by Moyo (2005) and Mandinyenya (2014) that there is a high dependence on NGOs in rural areas since

government policies have exhibited failure. Furthermore, NGO interventions are usually top-down and lack sustainability (Mandinyenya, 2014).

Nyathi et al. (2017) concurs with Mandinyenya (2014)'s assertion that the growth point policy used a top-down approach where the beneficiaries of the development programme (the rural folks) had no say in both the crafting and implementation of the policy. This approach has been associated with the failure of rural development initiatives since real development can only occur when beneficiaries of development are engaged, (Chambers, 1983). Rural women are generally less visible in development activities in Zimbabwe since the most important positions in society are occupied by men (Bhatasara, 2015). In addition, men are the ones who direct the course of development initiatives even though efforts are usually made to ensure equal representation between men and women.

Komte (2015) described the lack of women's participation in policy formulation as hindering their participation in economic development, particularly rural-based women. Women have less productive resources and are often underrepresented in rural organisations and institutions for socio-economic development (UNDP, 2012). This is evidenced by the unchanged socio-economic status of women since 1980. The growth point policy has not been amended over the years to be sensitive and acknowledge and include women's issues. Kozlcwski (2008), argues that rural women are key agents for rural development hence most rural intervention policies remain fragmented in ensuring that women's issues are at the front of the rural development discourse.

The ineffectiveness of the growth point policy in tackling rural developmental issues and achieving the intended objectives cannot be concluded without looking into some successes that were registered as noted by Nyathi et al. (2017). They acknowledge that in some growth points there were successes such as small industry creation, urbanisation and essential service provision recorded but were short-lived as a result of poor implementation and mismanagement. Consequently, that explains in part, why women empowerment through the growth point policy has not been achieved. However, there remains a gap in knowledge with regards to the extent of the successes and the impact(s) of the policy on the general rural population but more so, for women.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology adopted for this study was selected in order to acquire in-depth information and reach a conclusion on why the growth point policy has not been effective and successful in promoting women empowerment, in Tsholotsho District, Matebeleland North Province. Naturally, the qualitative methodology was adopted for this study. As described by Creswell (2008), qualitative research is a type of educational research in which the researcher relies on the news of participants, asks broad questions, collects data consisting of words/texts from participants, describes and analyses these words for themes, conducting the investigation in a subjective manner. A qualitative research approach was suited to this research as it aimed at understanding the lived experiences of women within the growth point policy trajectory in Tsholotsho District. As researcher, this allowed me to identify patterns and behaviours that may have been difficult to identify in a descriptive method. So, the investigation was carried out in its natural setting where the researcher did not manipulate the phenomenon (Patton, 2002). The methodology therefore, enabled me to enter the settings of Tsholotsho growth point and

carried out interviews with key informants and women in the FGDs as well as observe the natural phenomena in order to see how issues related to the situation under investigation.

Research Design

The study adopted the explorative design that was adopted for this study allowed the researcher to explore the phenomenon and interpret the emerging issues as they unfolded. It did not aim to provide the final and conclusive answers to the research questions but merely explored the research topic with varying levels of depth answering the how and why questions (Saunders et al. 2007). Moreover, the issues were not simply described and narrated as given by the participants but were also based on what had been reviewed in journals and books. Data were then analysed by describing what was collected and interpreted to derive meaning from it based on growth points and women empowerment. The data collected from various stakeholders was based on what they perceived as the relationship between the growth point policy and the socio-economic empowerment of rural women articulating it their way, knowledge and experiences.

Population, Sample and Sampling Technique

Population:

In this study, the target population included key informants comprising the local community leaders, officials from the Ministry of Local Government, Rural and Urban Development, Ministry of Women Affairs and Community Development, District Administrator, Department of Agriculture, Rural Development Authority (ARDAS) NGOs and EMA (Environmental Management Agency), NGOs, Growth Point Policy specialist (labelled KII1 –K1110). The two-focus group discussion (labelled C for women from the centre and V for women in the villages) were made up of women in and around Tsholotsho Growth point which has a total of 62189 women (CSO, 2002). Khotari (2004), describes the population of interest as the study's target population that it intends to investigate. It is made up of groups or individuals with one or more characteristics in common that are of interest to the researcher. It was hoped that the selected participants would be able to fully participate in the investigation and provide accurate information on the socio-economic empowerment of women through the growth point policy in Tsholotsho.

Sampling Technique:

This study adopted purposive sampling which is a type of non-probability sampling technique. It is based on when the sample is selected based on non-random criteria and without every member of the population having a chance of being included. Patton (2002) describes it as a technique widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of key informants and participants for the most effective use of limited resources. It involves identifying and selecting individuals that are known to the researcher and are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Creswell, 2011). In this study, the importance of availability, willingness to participate and the ability to communicate experiences and opinions in an articulate, expressive and reflective manner was considered.

Data Generation:

Myers (2009) notes that qualitative research is designed to help researchers to understand the lives of people through the social, political and cultural contexts they live in order to capture and gather in-depth information. Naturally, the qualitative approach recognises that the

researchers are the main instruments for data collection and get to experience the phenomenon first hand (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To this end, as the main researcher instruments for this study, we used in-depth interviews, engaged in non-participant observation, conducted focus group discussions and reviewed documents as data collection methods. The data collection methods used in this study were selected to deeply understand the phenomenon under investigation which is the socio-economic empowerment of women through the growth point policy. Data were analysed thematically.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The participants' evaluation of the extent of women empowerment due to the growth point policy was subsumed as thematically relating to the applicability of the growth point policy in addressing women empowerment issues in Tsholotsho. Evaluations from all the participants, both FGDs and KIIs were numerated and categorised by source reflecting the dominating (as portrayed by frequency) key areas of improvements. Six key areas were coded relating to improving service delivery, Small to Medium Enterprises (SMEs), developmental aid and increased agency from women, skills development and employment creation.

Among these key areas, improving service delivery followed by SMEs and developmental aid were most dominant findings that came from among the KIIs. Equally on the other hand improving service delivery was the most dominant among the FGD participants also followed by SMEs but then with relatively more allusions to skills development as protruding findings from among the women who participated in the FGDs.

Improving Service Delivery

Evaluations relating to proximity and availability of services were contextualised as conduit to women empowerment due to the growth point policy. This finding is equally the most dominant for both the KIIs and FGDs. The centre was said to have offered a near and reliable market for both the rural farmers and enterprising women from the centre. KII1 emphasised that the growth point is being instrumental in rallying customers and enterprising women at the centre;

.....definitely it has, if there was no growth point here, where would women be conducting their businesses or working. The growth point has been an enabler in promoting the socio-economic status of women... As a meeting place, it means that markets for different goods are readily available. Whatever one is selling, they don't need to travel far..... **KII1**

The views above show that decentralisation of key services were seen as progressive in the promotion of trade at the centre. Women have taken advantage of this progression and provision of services as enablers to create their own livelihoods. The nearness of markets has made it all possible to conduct business. This is alluded to by Nhede (2013), decentralisation allowed for essential service to be brought closer to the rural communities. This implies that the ushering in of the growth point has had an impact on women empowerment through improved service delivery. Chirisa, Dumba and Dube (2013) also concur that decentralisation of key services was one of the major reasons for adopting the growth point strategy.

Women at the centre confirmed that the growth point has enabled them to have services near to them, they are now getting help nearer. The Monday Market was used as an example implying that people selling different commodities converge at the centre on a Monday for

purposes of buying and selling. This move has been enabled by the general growing population at the centre that offers a business enabling environment for women.

Key informants also noted the improvement in service delivery was attributed to the centrality and proximity to health services. Despite the noted challenge with the cost, the mere nearness was applauded as a positive linkage to the growth point policy, C1 and C5 debated;

.....we have access to the hospital where we can be treated. However, the difficulties are that you have to pay before being attended to.... R180/ \$12. The 12 dollars is beyond the means of many, (laughing) we are now resorting to traditional medicines just like in the old days....."who can afford the hospital fees and medication"? **C1**

.....but we cannot not say having a hospital is bad, it is good, those who can afford it receive medical treatment. So I can say that having a growth point has changed our lives in a positive way. Talking of women's health, we have NGOs who offer training and advice and screening on women's health. But what they do is screen and refer to the hospital so it is up to you to seek further medical treatment depending if you have the money or not.....**C5**

KII1 also concurred with C5 that they do have NGOs that promote women's health and the hospital as well as clinics around the district that women benefit from. KII2 further illuminated that they do have a big hospital with a capacity of 300 beds for women, men and children's wards with a lot of departments, doctors, nurses as well as a school of nursing;

.....we have a big hospital that services the whole district... the hospital is quite big and has a capacity of 300 beds for women, men and children's wards. It has a lot of departments, doctors, nurses as well as a school of nursing. [The hospital offers full board] yes, it does, it offers consultation, X rays and admissions. It is fully equipped, only more complicated cases are referred to Mpilo hospital in Bulawayo, there are 3 resident doctors currently.....**KII2**

As earlier reiterated, the most central benefit reported by all the participants was the decentralisation of services, making these more accessible to the rural community. The hospital and the registration offices are now localised. People from all over the district come to the centre to access different services. Access to the market also serve as a key decentralised service especially for the farmers from the villages. For instance, the presence of the GMB was reported to have made the marketing of farm produce easy and accessible. Overall, government departments were reported to be offering various services that the locals used to travel to Bulawayo and Plumtree for. This is supported by Munzwa and Jonga (2010) that decentralisation of services was an essential part of establishing the growth points in Zimbabwe. As indicated although women have agreed that the growth point has resulted in improved service delivery, they are still not entirely satisfied.

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs)

The establishment and growing of women led businesses, characteristically SMEs, was subsumed as empowerment due to the growth point policy. This finding was equally the second most dominant for both the KIIs and FGDs, especially through buying and selling (trade by women) SMEs, it was found that women are thriving at the center feeding for their families.

As reiterated above, most women are self-employed in their SMEs and also employ others in these enterprises. All the women in the FGD at the Centre concurred that most of the employment opportunities are within the small businesses operating at the centre. C8 echoed a description that all the participants agreed with;

..... yes, most of us (women) are self-employed, we buy and sell, we also run kitchens where we cook food and we have people who comes to buy, we sell dresses, food stuffs as vendors going around or at the flea markets. So, in these businesses we also employ others (assistants) to help with the chores and that is how employment is created here.... **C8**

With regards to the extent of success of these businesses, the profit margins were said to be low. For example, C5 has her own kitchen (a small eating place) and she serve meals, 3 times a day. Her income hardly covers the expenses. Most of the money goes towards procuring supplies, rent for the premises and wages for the assistants' help. However, the returns were said to be sufficient for them to make a living, paying for household expenses like school fees, food and rent. Living in the urban setup had driven a number of women to tap in to their capacities and this has seen a number of them, establishing more than one enterprise, multi-tasking and task shifting among these endeavours. In C8's case, she runs a kitchen, farming and manufactures of detergents;

.....it is an advantage for me to have three business ventures, when the kitchen is not making any profits, instead of having to borrow, I take money from the detergents to support the kitchen. I also do the same for the farming activities. I have employed people to help me in all the three projects..... **C8**.

Having small businesses was said to be a response to the capacity and market thresholds of the Growth Point. It was noted that none of the women mentioned big amounts or business intentions reportedly so because the reality at the growth point has not grown sufficiently enough to sustain big initiatives;

..... we are dealing with real situations, why waste time wishing for something that will never happen, what we want is to be able to fend for our families only. So the little that we can get, we would appreciate that a lot.**C2**

..... we all depend on our small businesses for survival, but these businesses are small, not growing hence we are not able to make good profits. The conditions that were operate in makes it difficult for the businesses to expand..... **C8**

Most of the businesses are just SMEs and there are no big industries to stir the development, most of the activities and employment creation is within the SMEs or other service points. This view is supported by Manyanhaire et al (2019) that manufacturing is more important than retail trade. This shows that the employment activities undertaken by women are not by choice but they have been triggered by lack on industries that the growth point is presumably meant to create. Growth point were set to stimulate industrial growth to eradicate poverty (Mawere, Mbindi, & Chirevo, 2012).

Currently, the Centre was described as operating with light industries, KII2 pointed to the existence of small light industries comprising of two abattoirs, motor mechanic workshops,

welding and general dealer shops. As for women's endeavours, KII7 confirmed that there is no diversity; everyone is selling the same things. It was viewed that selling the same products also accounted for the low incomes that most women experienced and hence lack of growth within the business ventures. The same sentiments were expressed in literature by Ellis (2000) when he cited women empowerment as the ability of women to reduce vulnerabilities based on the increase in economic activities. It is therefore evident that economic activities within the growth point trajectory are fragile and therefore can be regarded as minute empowerment.

Development Aid

The ability to attract, relate and monitor various developmental partners, mostly NGOs, was subsumed as empowerment due to the growth point policy. Establishment of the district offices and urban built-up area has facilitated the recentralisation of the NGO efforts and efficiencies in communication and response to community needs. NGO efforts were mostly noted in enhancing livelihoods, health promotions and skills/knowledge development.

FGD participants in the village delighted in having access to a lot of facilities such as health, skills development, water and livelihoods through NGOs. It was revealed that knowledge and information in the communities came with NGOs and government departments;

..... we now have access to a lot of facilities such as health, education, water and livelihoods by NGOs. Previously there were no food handouts that we see today being carried out by the government and some NGOs. Knowledge and information in the communities came with NGOs and government departments. We have learnt a lot from the NGOs operating in the district, especially on agriculture.....**V1**

NGOs have done so much work in the communities to the extent that their work was being perceived as having overshadowed the efforts of the government that enabled them in the first place;

..... the government has forgotten us, if it was not for the NGOs, we would not be having some of the things and knowledge we have. We also want to have better lives and livelihoods that are sustainable like irrigations.**V10**

As said above, the presence and or attraction of NGO activities in the district were variously linked to tremendous advancement of women's social and economic status. The proliferation of livelihoods, food assistance, health and SRHR (sexual reproductive health and rights) programs have equipped women with knowledge and capacities to improve their statuses. With high prevalence of HIV/AIDS in the district, NGOs have made an effort to spearhead campaigns in this regard. The role of the NGOs is therefore, mostly a helping hand that in part facilitates the implementation of the government policies and strategies. It was also observed that the presence of Tsholotsho growth point has attracted non-state actors to work in the district in pursuit of addressing poverty through capacitation with different socio-economic interventions. From the above response it can be argued that there is a lot of dependency on non-state actors in the district. Mandinyenya (2014) has shown that NGO intervention has created dependency and have not addressed the needs of women. However, the study discovered that there are mixed feelings on rating of NGO work but generally women rely a lot

on NGO projects and interventions, a view noted by Save the Children (2002) ; that there is over-reliance on NGO handouts.

Increased Agency from Women

Apparent increased participation and involvement of women in various developmental forums and leadership in business initiatives, was contextualised as empowerment due to the growth point policy. Developmental projects have mostly attracted women, more so because they are now playing critical roles in the families following the massive movement of males into nearby countries (outward male migration). Being the most head of households, women were found to be more involved in the developmental activities in the district and they reported being independent and participating more in the economic activities. This shows that the absence of males has resulted in women being de facto heads of households therefore having the initiative to support the family. This has resulted in women being able to explore economic activities outside of farming. This was seen as an empowerment tool, women fending for their families and making their own decisions. On the contrary, there is a belief that there is a bi-directional relationship between freedom and women empowerment (Duflo, 2011). Women's freedoms are presumed to be the window to socio-economic empowerment.

Skills Development

Reference to various trainings and evidence of application and hybridisation of the applied skills was contextualised as empowerment due to the growth point policy. The skills acquired have fed into the growing entrepreneurship reportedly supporting the basic needs for their respective families. The centre was commended for variety and potential for much more growth. The urban women have benefitted from platforms whereby women can work and be able to fend for their families. The government and partner support created a number of projects supporting women to be empowered and fend for themselves. Reports were made by women of some district efforts to educate women on various aspects of their lives and appreciate the worthy of women in the society. Reference was made by KII2 to the presence of a school of nursing attracting qualifying applicants. However, most training was said to be done by the NGOs;

..... most of the training for skills development is conducted by NGOs especially when they are introducing a new project. So, most trainings are done in the villages because that is where most NGO work happens. With us here at the centre, we get training for women's health. Most of us do not have tertiary education and we have learnt to train ourselves using skills learnt from others..... **C8**

In the same vein, the Ministry of Women Affairs was also noted as being at the forefront in stirring the skills development among women as well as the general welfare of women. Agricultural extension workers were also said to be working well in enhancing the farming skills. V9 reported of the existence of veterinary services extension workers who have enhanced their skills through village visits, teaching them on care of livestock. As a result, they are not losing livestock as much as they used to because their knowledge had been enhanced. V5 also prides herself in having a permanent Agritex officer who stays in the villages and often carries out training and awareness campaigns. If there is an outbreak of diseases the officer informs and guides them accordingly. The same views are shared by Bhat (2015) that the education of women is a powerful tool to change their position in society, it is the foundation

for the empowerment of women. The study noted that even though Ministry of Women Affairs and its supporting partners are not offering mainstream education but the skills that are being transmitted are working for the greater good of women to be informed of issues and activities that concern them. Campbell and Sayer (2003) further note that human capital in the form of skills and knowledge ensure that different livelihood outcomes are pursued.

Employment Creation

Women who have acquired their skills are mostly self-employing themselves and, in the process, employ others in their business ventures. C8 gave a best description of the work situations at the Centre; buying and selling. C10 reiterated that those with businesses employ others and these small-scale businesses are the basis of most employment opportunities. KII2 also confirmed that the light industry and the SMEs are attracting employees from all over the district. These sentiments indicate the increased agency that women have and have contributed to employment creation through their small enterprises. Gasper (2008) viewed the role of growth points in rural development as one that not only focuses on agricultural production but comes up with ideas for industrial development. The study found that there are no significant industries in the district hence women have been empowered to create their own work and for others as well. This shows that women are economically active and can claim the proceeds.

CONCLUSION

From the above discussion the conceptualisation of the growth point's potential to women empowerment is based on the key factors such as improved service delivery, SMEs, development aid, increased agency from women, skills development and employment creation that have resulted in addressing women empowerment issues in Tsholotsho. It was evident from the views and perception from all participants that the issues confronting women have, to a large extent been addressed by the provisions of the growth point. Women from the FGDs indicated that amongst themselves, they have managed to have their own businesses and still create employment for other women. This shows that empowerment is cascading in the district owing to women's increased participation that has been enabled by the growth point.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends the following;

- The growth point policy should be revisited in order to come up with interventions that take into account issues that constrain women in the rural sector.
- The government should render the necessary support to women business owners.
- The government should monitor projects and intervention by non- state actors so as not create dependency.
- Resources base promotion and industrialisation should be prioritised in order that women can have sustainable livelihoods.

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