

# **Mothers, Soil, and Substance: Stories of Endurance from the Matobo Hills, Zimbabwe**

**Belinda Ncube**, *Swiss Church Aid, Bulawayo*

Land, a scarce and finite resource is the foundation of livelihoods for most Zimbabweans, particularly women who constitute the greatest number of the farmers who work the land for survival. Women farmers are responsible for most of the farm produce yet they do not own the land that they work. Land redistribution programmes, whether those by the colonial government before 1980 or the post-colonial independent state, have displaced and discriminated against women. This paper seeks to highlight the conditions of women, a majority being widows in Matopo District of south-western Zimbabwe, that is, in and around Matopo Mission farm, established by Brethren in Christ Church (BICC) missionaries in the 1890s. The relationship between land and faith is explored as women farmers tell their stories of endurance and resilience to the ever-changing harsh economic, social and environmental conditions. Changing weather conditions, conspiring with a declining economy, have eroded the ability of these women to harvest significant produce from their farms and to obtain a decent income from their labour. This paper also seeks to understand the coping mechanisms that have been adopted by women in response to these changing conditions.

## Unbundling the Theory

Richard White, the noted U.S. environmental historian, has argued that the history of the environment is incomplete without addressing the imperialist undertones that remain hidden in the discourse. White is especially adamant that European expansion into indigenous territories is a crucial part of this account and must not be treated simply as the domination of a weaker, “more primitive” system by a more “efficient” one (White, 1990, 1113). More recently, U.S. historian Gregg Mitman has added his voice to the idea that humans spread over the world for their own good, arguing that this assertion is insufficient as it neglects to address key factors such as “power, class, religion, gender and race,” (Mitman, 2013, n.p.) factors which have fuelled discrimination.

In sync with Mitman’s (2013) gendered approach to the relationship between humans and nature is ecofeminism, a school of thought which has regained ground since its introduction in the 1970s. Warren (2000) explains that ecofeminism refers to the “important connections between the unjustified dominations of women, people of color, children, and the poor and the unjustified domination of nature” (1). Recently African scholars have added their own perspective to the discourse. Muthuki (2006) explores ecofeminism, illustrating how male domination is the cause of oppression of both women and nature. Although ecofeminists differ, influenced by the feminist perspectives from which their arguments are derived, it is fundamentally accepted that women and nature are oppressed.

The question remains, however, whether this oppression is naturally occurring or is a structural imposition. From an African view, Muthuki (2006) points out that African ecofeminists reject the western perspectives which view “women’s experiences as homogeneous, based on the perspectives of middle-class white western women” (13). However, it must be noted that for women in the Global South, the “exploitative structures and systems” are embedded in “complexities of slavery [and] imperialism” (13), requiring a deeper analysis to understand these relations and how to liberate women from that which enslaves both them and nature. It is further suggested by African feminists that “erosion of women’s power is caused by the intrusion of foreign systems with different gender orientations and new paradigms of power organization...” (Muthuki, 2006, 13). The experiences of women from the Global South are the subject of my paper and will be discussed later.

In order to demonstrate the imperialist form of the human-environment relations in the context of Matopo Misson of south-western Zimbabwe it is necessary to note the work of British historian Terence Ranger (1989) who explores the human-nature dichotomy with a focus on the Matopo National Park. Established in 1926, the Rhodes Matopo National Park eventually expanded, forcing villagers from their homes. In addition, they were banned from grazing their cattle, harvesting thatching grass, or visiting sacred sites within the Park. The “Sofasonke,” meaning “Let’s die together”, rebellion was framed on these grievances. Ranger’s (1988) interview with Denge Sibindi, a shrine caretaker within the Park, revealed that the Matopo villagers had resisted their eviction from the Matopo National Park for a reason: “the hills are fruitful. Once it rains a bit everything sprouts.” The people knew that one eviction could lead to another. Sibindi also believed that the evictions angered the spirits, causing food shortages and hunger in the communities, including the disappearance of wild fruits. Later, Ranger (1989) explored the contradictory perspectives of white conservation pitted against African perceptions. He explains how the National Parks Department ironically sought to “restore” the natural environment within the Matopos; however, the African inhabitants maintained that the “Matopos environment had been created over centuries by human use and that African occupation of the hills was sanctioned by history, religion and custom.” (218)

This account complicates the classical “nature-culture” divide. U.S. environmental historian, Linda Nash (2013) argues that this dichotomy produces “apathy and resistance” instead of “motivating change” (n.p.). It also accords with Royden Loewen’s (2005, 156) call to explore farmer records and community specific literature in search of an “environmental dialectic” (156), that is, the idea that humans and the environment have corresponding effects on each other. Mitman’s (2013) view parallels this idea; he states that “interactions of human beings with the material world shape and in turn, are transformed by human thought, belief and action” (para. 3). The farmers of the Matopo Hills were a fundamental part of “nature” that the Rhodesian government tried to “restore;” culture and nature in this instance could not be separated.

In the context of this field of study, wrought with theoretical contradictions, I have taken a research approach that involved studying existing literature on the Brethren in Christ Church (BICC) in Zimbabwe, interviewing female and male BICC farmers, digging into the political, socio-economic context, and comparing these findings against known theory in order to better understand

the changing human-nature relationship among this people group in Zimbabwe. This paper explores the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial eras, deepening insight into land and race, but especially gender inequality. The pre-independence period is marred with discrimination on all fronts, most of which are said to have been addressed in the post-colonial state; however, women still remain in the periphery. My paper addresses this question of the relationship between women and their environment. Women played especially important roles on the land, addressing environmental stewardship, working the land for gain (mostly in the absence of their husbands), and raising and caring for the family. They have, however, never been recognized for this role on the land, their inherent place within “nature.”

### **The Endless Quest for Land Acquisition, Tenure and Ownership**

The “land” problem has been at the heart of the history of Zimbabwe, previously (Southern) Rhodesia, including BICC history, and at each turn it has been indelibly linked to the question of “race.” The Lippert Concession of 1889 and The Native Reserves Order in Council of 1898, for example, were early actions meant to expropriate land from blacks while awarding land to whites (Embassy of Zimbabwe, n.d). The BICC Matopo Mission, established in 1898 under controversial circumstances, benefitted from white colonialist Cecil John Rhodes’ grant of 3,000 acres of land, accompanied by his famous quip that missionaries “are better than policemen and cheaper.” This land became the base of the first BICC mission post in Africa, the Matopo Mission, an example of how Christianity became intertwined with colonisation. Schwartz (1993) observes how missionaries became “effective allies” of western governments in “civilizing” people, paving the way for western domination. It was an equation not lost on the first BICC missionaries. In her memoirs, BICC missionary Hannah Frances Davidson narrates the tense situation her party of U.S. missionaries arrived in Matabeleland in 1898: “We entered the country a little over a year after the close of the rebellion...What is still more significant, we were located in the very heart of these hills where no missionary had yet penetrated, and being surrounded by many of the rebels themselves....still seething with discontent from the same cause which led to the Rebellion.” These late nineteenth century injustices were exacerbated in the twentieth. In 1930 the Rhodesian government passed the Land Apportionment Act (LAA),

aimed at formalising the separation of land ownership according to colour. The LAA was built upon recommendations from the Morris Carter Commission of 1925 which noted that it was important for the two races to remain separated. The Commission (as cited in Rifkind, 1968, p. 33) highlighted that “[h]owever desirable it may be [that] the members of the two races should live together side by side with equal rights, [as] regards the holding of land, we are convinced that in practice, probably for generations to come, such a policy is not practicable or in the best interest of the two races.”

More blacks were, thus, moved into the Native Reserves while whites consolidated and gained more land. Native Purchase Areas (NPA) were created in order to afford successful blacks an opportunity to own land. This was viewed as a strategy of creating a loyal black middle class (Duggan, 227). While more fertile land was given to whites, the native black people were moved to less productive, Tsetse fly and wild animal infested zones. According to the 1930 LAA (Rifkind, 45), the country had a population of 1,150 000 people with whites constituting 4.3 per cent of the population, yet owning 51.6 per cent of the land, while the black population measured 95.6 per cent but lived on 22 per cent of the land. Blacks had the option to purchase land from the 7.8 per cent allocated as NPA; however, a majority of them could not raise the income required to purchase land in the NPA.

This racial injustice is something BICC farmers still remember. John Masuku narrates how the villagers, including their property (household assets and cattle), were forcibly moved by trucks and taken to previously uninhabited places. “You would come home from school and find your home belongings have already been packed and you are being moved,” explains John. His family was saved from relocation by the fact that part of their farm was within the newly created Matopo Native Reserve. They only were forced to leave the part of the farm that had been allocated as a white man’s farm. The families whose land fell outside the marked Native Reserves were moved to Jotsholo, over three hundred kilometres away from their original homes. The Jotsholo district was little more than bush, says John, and they had to start life from nothing. It was a painful period in history (J. Masuku, interview, April 19, 2015). Timothy Sibanda’s family experienced displacement as well. He describes with agony on his face how they had to start afresh each time they were moved, as most of their possessions were destroyed while they were being transported to each new location. When Timothy was young, his family was moved to pave the way for a commercial, white-owned farm. His father found work on the

farm and they moved back onto the farm as farm workers (T. Sibanda, interview, April 24, 2015).

With many Africans having been moved to Native Reserves, land degradation soon became an issue. Legislation such as the Native Land Husbandry Act (NLHA) of 1951 had been enacted by the Rhodesian government to impose private ownership of land and enforce destocking and conservation practices on black farmers. It was met with resistance, which in turn fueled the long liberation struggle. The colonial belief that black farmers and their traditional agricultural methods were destructive to the environment was strong and influenced many of the laws introduced during this period. Alvord (as cited in Chitiyo, 2000), for example, predicted an “environmental apocalypse” if blacks continued to use destructive traditional primitive African farming methods.

An important shift in administration of the colonial state occurred in 1965 when the Tribal Trust Lands Act (TTLA) renamed the old Native Reserves and put them under the jurisdiction of the ‘chiefs’, the traditional leaders, now deemed to be ‘trustees’. This act was necessitated by the continued “degradation” of land in the Native Reserves and it was believed that the chiefs could restore control and order in these areas. Chiefs were given powers to impose sanctions in case of environmental degradation. There was a belief that incorporating blacks into the administration, through their chiefs, could motivate change; however, the politicization of conservation interventions led to failure as these initiatives eventually had to be enforced by the colonial government, a situation that led to further animosity between the colonial government and the black farmers.

This skewed land ownership system continued until 1980 when Zimbabwe became independent from colonial rule. At independence the Zimbabwe Government, embracing a reconciliatory approach, offered an opportunity to white farmers to give up some of their land to landless black Zimbabweans. The 1985 Land Acquisition Act, which was premised on a willing buyer/willing seller arrangement, encouraged white commercial farmers to shed some of their land and sell it to the government, to be used for resettlement purposes. The uptake among white farmers was slower than had been anticipated, however, which led the government to introduce the Land Acquisition Act in 1992. This legislation paved the way for the government to compel white farmers to sell their land. This action was met with continuing reluctance from white land owners to sell (Chitiyo, 2000, p. 15-17) and thus in 2000, the government supported landless black peasants engaged in a full scale land-

grabbing exercise through farm invasions. Legislation was later passed to legalise the land seizures. Due to a lack of experience among the new farmers and their lack of resources to work the land, however, this Fast Track Land Reform was less successful than had been hoped, (Scoones cited in Mabheba, 2010, p. 3). The government had also underestimated the funds required to support a project of this magnitude. Furthermore, the economic decline that saw the Zimbabwean dollar collapse until it was scrapped completely, coupled with persistent droughts, worked in complicity against the land reform.

### Women and Land in Zimbabwe

At this juncture, it must be underscored that in all these struggles for land, women were not central, not even peripheral; they were in fact considered minors. Muthuki (2006), bemoans how colonial rule left a “legacy of a patriarchal state” (14). Indeed, it was only in 1982 that the Legal Age of Majority Act conferred full legal capacity to all Zimbabweans, including women, above the age of eighteen. However, this did not translate into an increase in rates of female land ownership. According to the Presidential Land Review Committee (2003), after the Fast Track Reform women comprised only eighteen per cent of the beneficiaries of land under the A1 (small holder farms approximately 37 hectares) model and twelve per cent under the A2 (commercial farms averaging 318 hectares) model of land ownership (25). However, it must be emphasised that although women own very little land, they are the greatest producers from the land. Based on the work of a number of scholars Shumba (2011) notes that women are the greatest producers of food in the world yet they are not in control or ownership of land (236).

This inequity is also apparent at the BICC Matopo Mission. That women played significant roles in farming in Matopo is clear from testimonials from two men, John Masuku, quoted above, and Denny Ndlovu, both widowed and elderly. They described how they used to work in the city while their wives stayed at home and worked in the field in the rural areas. Their wives were in complete charge of the homestead and farm and were responsible for food production for their families. Both men attributed the survival of their homesteads to their wives.

Women’s achievements and unparalleled work on the farm is also evidenced by accounts of BICC women such as Eldah Siziba and

Eldah Gumpo, who worked on the family farms while their husbands were away in the city. Eldah Siziba, an elderly widow, tells of how she used to produce sweet potatoes to sell in town in order to generate income to send her children to school. She also produced food for consumption in the home. However, she did not own the land that she worked; it belonged to her husband, who mostly did not know what was going on in the fields at any given time (E. Siziba, interview, April 24, 2015). Eldah Gumpo, another elderly widow, also remained at home in the rural areas while her husband worked in town. Eldah grew up in the rural areas of Mtshabezi and came to Matopo by marriage to her husband, Gumpo, whose parents lived on the Mission farm. Eldah and her late husband both moved to town during the War of Liberation when Gumpo's life was threatened because he had worked as a policeman under the white government. At Independence in 1980, Eldah returned to the Matobo Misson farm to revive her homestead. Eldah was immediately faced with the challenge of trying to prove her right to the land she was claiming. The BIC Church did not want her to settle on the farm since her husband had remained in town, leaving her for another woman (E. Gumpo, interview, November 14, 2015). Eldah had been abandoned by her husband, had young children, did not have support from her brothers who were far away, and was therefore in a vulnerable position. The issue was eventually resolved with the involvement of the police who, after a number of interrogations became convinced of Eldah's story and helped prove her rights to the land she was claiming. Eldah was then able to build her homestead on the Mission farm (E. Gumpo *ibid.*).

### **Spiritualism, Environmental Conservation and the Brethren**

Ndebele women have also had a spiritual connection to the land. Indeed, the role of women in Ndebele culture is enhanced by a culture that is infused with rituals that are meant to instil respect for the land and environment. Failure to abide by these rules or if one is to misuse natural resources that *UMlimo* (God) has given to mankind, leads to bad luck. Thus environmental consciousness has always been part of the Ndebele belief system. Certainly male leaders have been praised for their leadership and insights on environmental issues. Annually, the King of the AmaNdebele would call a great feast called *Inxwala* where the people would offer sacrifices and the King would dedicate the Nation to *Umvelinqangi* (which translates to "the one who was there before all things").



After harvest, there were rituals regarding the first fruits called *UkuChinsa*. Father Hartmann (1945) explains how the ceremony would last for over four days with a lot of celebration while the food was being dedicated. During these celebrations, women were responsible for preparing the food to be dedicated and sharing it amongst the people after the dedication. Farmers would wait for a proclamation before they could start eating crops from their fields. If you ate before the blessing was pronounced, you would get sick; bad luck would be your portion and at times you could be killed.

My own research highlights the roles of women beyond these types of rituals, emphasising how they have had an effect on environmental stewardship. Effie Moyo, an elderly woman who lives with her husband just outside the Mission Farm, explains the myths regarding the environment and the local people: "One was not allowed to hunt animals randomly; you were only allowed to kill what you would eat. Forest fruits were not for sale; they were God's way of ensuring that even those who had bad harvests would not go hungry" (E. Moyo, interview, January 10, 2016). She believes that long ago people used to respect the land and therefore nature would also take good care of people. The various feasts that were conducted enabled people to draw closer to the environment. Effie notes with sadness how people have brutalised the environment in recent years. This disrespect for nature, she explains, has also caused God to become angry and He has allowed calamities to befall people. She further states: "Long ago, when God had worked very hard during a rainstorm, He would rest on a tree, and not on a person. But now you hear that someone was struck by lightning. It is because of our sins. We have made the land to be filthy." (E. Moyo, *ibid.*) She links the two religions – the old and the new, the animistic and the Christian – in her discussions of the environment. She explains that they are Christians and so there are some rituals they do not practice anymore, like dedicating their seeds to the ancestors; however, respect for the land is common for both faiths and so, she states, they still hold to it dearly.

Josephine Siziba speaks of how she as a member of the BICC also has customs with regard to farming. Before planting, church members take a small portion of their seed to the church for prayer and blessing. Once the pastor has prayed for the seed, they mix it with the remainder of the seed and pray for it and then plant it. Josephine prays every morning and asks for strength to work the land and to take care of her home. When it is harvest time, she takes the first fruits of the crop and gives it to the church. It is like *ukuChinsa*, but now she does not dedicate her first fruits to un-

known spirits. Josephine is a widow and has been working the land with her children for over twenty years. Her husband was a witch-doctor and Josephine explains some of the rituals that she and her husband used to perform before planting began: they would put the seed in a gourd, brew beer and mix it with the seed and dedicate it to their ancestral spirits, after which they would plant the seeds. They used to get a good harvest if the rains were good. She explains the key difference between these two practices in her life: now that she is a Christian, she gets a good harvest even during a bad year; God has been faithful to his Word in her life (J. Siziba, interview, January 9, 2016).

But Josephine is not interested in only reciting the peculiarities of one culture or religion over another; she also has the environment as a concern. She states that she believes that people have generally not been good stewards of the environment, noting the wanton hunting of animals, leading to the extinction of some species. They hardly see wildlife in their farms, yet when they first lived there the wild animals were in abundance. She also explains that some trees are under threat of vanishing (J. Siziba, *ibid.*)

In continuing with their roles as stewards of the land, some women have attempted to restore the environment through measures such as gully reclamation. Zandile Nyandeni, an elderly woman who now lives alone on her mother's homestead, has attempted to reclaim the gullies in her yard through filling them with stones. However, she believes the introduction of contour ridges, a method of controlling soil erosion through creating furrows in the fields, is the cause for the climate woes facing the country since colonialization. As she sees it, the rain was being withheld by the ancestors who were unhappy with the colonial government for forcing black people to suffer through digging contour ridges (Z. Nyandeni, interview, April 24, 2015). This is the view that was shared by many farmers during the colonial era and contour ridges were rejected as they were seen as a symbol of colonialism. What Zandile is unaware of is that the gullies can only be reclaimed if the source of erosion is eliminated; in this case, she is mistaken as it is the absence of contour ridges in her fields that have led to erosion, eventually leading to gaping gullies in her yard and environmental degradation.

Other women have played a significant role by acquiring training in farming from different agencies including government extension officers. Sikhanyisiwe Ndlovu, a widow living with her grandchildren is keen to explain her education. She received a Master Farmer certificate from government for her achievements.

The training was based on the white man's ways of farming. However, in the recent years, Sikhanyisiwe has also received farmer training in a new way called *ga-ntshompo*. This involves digging holes equidistant from each other; putting manure and seed in the holes, and then waiting for the rains. Other farmers refer to it as "Conservation Farming." It is a labour intensive process that needs communities to work together as the basins or holes are dug with a handheld hoe on land spanning over four acres (S. Ndlovu, interview, May 1, 2015). The "new" conservation farming methods are very similar to the traditional farming methods; it is like going back to the past in order to go the future. Krammer (1997, 160), for one, observes that "Somewhat ironically, such a system of cultivation has in recent years, (and with modifications) regained popularity and is once again being used and adapted to an intensive system of cultivation. This is known as permaculture and is currently being used in Zimbabwe by some cooperatives; and is also used in some first world countries."

Sikhanyisiwe explains that she gets a better harvest from the *ga-ntshompo* than when she uses the ox-drawn plow. Other farmers attest to this and more are adopting *ga-ntshompo*. Those who cannot engage in the laborious process hire labour, paid for with money, clothes or food. These traditional methods produce better yields, says Sikhanyisiwe, than the modern ways. Wilson's (1995) observation that "real understanding" and "sustainable development" can only flow from new power relationships with rural people and their knowledge" (281) is relevant here as it emphasizes indigenous knowledge systems over white practices. Sikhanyisiwe also has a garden and an orchard that she waters from a perennial spring flowing from the boulders outside her yard. The water flows from an 'unknown source' hidden within the rocky mountains.

Sikhanyisiwe is conscious that she should take care of the environment. She says that when she started farming she did not use fertilizer on her farm but now she uses it because the "viscose" (a dark green, leafy curl-like vegetable) that she grows only does well with fertilizer. She notes, however, an increase in the number of pesticides and also an increase in the amount of fertilizer that is used every year. Sikhanyisiwe is also concerned about an invasive species of tree, the Lantana Camara, said to have come from flowers that came with the missionaries. The Lantana Camara is a vampire bush-like plant that sucks life out of the soil on which it grows, leaving no grazing grass or any kind of vegetation under it. It easily spreads and has taken a great chunk of ranch land (S. Ndlovu, interview, May 1, 2015). While the missionaries were

known for environmental consciousness and farming astuteness, Sikhanyisiwe is not certain how their actions led to the destruction of native plants.

Noticeably, women have been the custodians of spirituality and environmental conservation since pre-Christian times as demonstrated by interviews held with women and men in and around the Matobo BICC Mission. When they converted to Christianity, women continued to lead as guardians of spiritual matters by constituting the majority of the active congregants in the Church, while also participating in environmental friendly farming projects.

### **Women's Roles on the Farm, Evolution or Consolidation?**

My research further reveals that women have been central in preserving the family farm. Interviews with Eldah Gumpo, Josephine Siziba, Sikhanyisiwe Ndlovu and Timothy Sibanda detail how women have been transitioning in various roles overtime.

Eldah Gumpo, after being abandoned by her husband, returned to rural life, far from the city glitz to start a life on her own. Having fought for the land where she currently lives, she worked on the land with her children and earned enough to be able to send them to school. She grew food for the children to eat and also produced sweet potatoes and vegetables to sell. She sold most of her vegetables to Mission. Her children have grown up and all have good jobs now and they take great care of their mother. Her yellow painted house with a red roof stands out from distance. Houses are usually spruced up when they are weddings but hers is always well taken care of. She enjoys all the modern luxuries including a solar powered system to provide electricity, a television and refrigerator. In 2001 Eldah's faith was put to the test, when her husband, Gumpo, returned to her home 23 years after abandoning her. He was sick unto death and Eldah tells of the shock and pain that she went through before, moved by her faith and supported by her BICC, she opened her home for Gumpo. The strength and character required of her during this trying time, she says, is testimony of what the Church teaches: forgiveness and love. Gumpo's illness had affected his mental health and he would frequently insult Eldah; nevertheless, she says she never raised her voice but in service took care of him, changed his diapers, fed him and washed him with the help of other church members. Eldah is one of the many women whose roles includes caring for the infirm. The role extends to caring for the orphans and children whose parents have

fled economic hardships in Zimbabwe and are living illegally in South Africa and Botswana. Her view of the land extends to her sense of social responsibility.

Josephine Siziba also uses her farm to take care of her family, including two of her grandchildren, one whom is a mentally unstable nineteen year old (who occasionally beats her) and a five year old sent home, without any financial support, by parents from South Africa. Josephine works in her garden and grows vegetables that she sells in town. She grows viscose, tomatoes, peas and carrots. Income from these sales is channelled towards the upkeep of her grandchildren. Josephine also grows maize in her fields. This is rain-fed and has been affected by drought; however, due to her determination, she plants two or three times until she gets a good crop. Crop failure does not deter her. She is a successful farmer and was chosen to receive a new variant of maize seed that is being tested in Matabeleland (J. Siziba, interview, January 9, 2016).

On the role of women in the fields, garden and homestead, the three women Josephine Siziba, Sikhanyisiwe Ndlovu and Eldah Gumpo explain that they have done work that was traditionally designated for men. They believe that the roles of men and women have been changing over time. People are now able to assume roles that cut across genders. While in the past it was unheard of that a woman would “hold” an ox-drawn plough, now women do it. Men did not want to weed as it was thought to be for the weak women; now men also weed, although this type of man is in the minority.

During the interviews it was also highlighted that in the past it was the norm for women to remain in the rural areas while the men worked in town; however, the modern woman rejects this notion. All three women (Eldah, Sikhanyisiwe and Josephine) embraced this modern view, grudgingly, but acknowledged that with the scourge of HIV and AIDS, separating couples was invariably setting one up for a tragedy and they thus favoured that their children reside with their wives. The elderly women have house-help if there is need. This is a direct shift from the traditional philosophy that a daughter-in-law takes care of the husband’s parents. In this new era, young women hire help for their in-laws so that they can be assisted in the fields and for any other chores. The role of women is now evolving with more women being able to make choices about where they live and what tasks they can do. The persona of “women restricted to the domestic sphere” is also taking a new face as the house-help can either be a man or a woman.

The role of women in times of political upheaval was also explored in my interviews, albeit carefully, due to the sensitivity of

the subject. Matabeleland, particularly Matopo was one of the worst hit areas to be affected by Gukurahundi massacres between 1980 to 1987 (CCJP, 1997, p.20). The 'dissidents' also targeted the Matopo Mission for raids. One interviewee told of how they had to run away at night to the city because they were being accused of feeding the 'dissidents'. The brunt of the pain was felt mostly by women who could not run away quickly enough because of the children. The atrocities remain shrouded in secrecy and to this day the government has not acknowledged them. The pain remains apparent with victims who carry the wounds (CCJP, 1997, p. 15). It is estimated that over 20, 000 people were killed or forced to disappear in Matabeleland. There is a perception that the government has continued to perpetuate structural violence to alienate the Ndebele, thus pursuing the objectives of the massacres.

Further demonstrating the important role of women in conflict, the horrific consequences of the 2000 land reforms were mitigated by women as explained by Timothy Sibanda. Timothy's family was evicted from the land by the new black owners who had seized the former white owned farm. Timothy was a former farmer worker and was viewed as sympathetic to the white farm owners who had been dispossessed. Timothy's wife was his pillar as she was able to stand strong during these evictions. She was a BICC member, while he was not a church member then. Due to her involvement and participation in church work, the family was offered land on the Mission Farm. During the violence linked to the 2000 elections Mrs. Sibanda and her family were threatened with death and accused of working with the opposition and the British Government. This accusation stemmed from her work of distributing food aid and medical supplies to those in need. This was viewed as a threat and campaign strategy for the opposition. However, this threat was addressed through prayer and the war veterans who were at the fore front of the terror stopped the threats. Timothy started going to church on an erratic schedule until he says, he "gave his life to the Lord." He is now a deacon in the church. He attributes all this to his wife's support and perseverance (T. Sibanda, interview, April 24, 2015).

Women's roles have been evolving. They have cared for the homes while husbands were away working, and they served as social backbones during upheavals such as the 1980s massacres and 2000s land reforms. They have included elderly women who have survived on the land during the AIDS crisis, as well as liberated young women who have been able to work far from home with the liberty to stay with their husbands. They have also been the recipi-

ents of remittances used to pay for helpers to care for the home farm.

### Global Markets and City Glitz

Women have also had to adapt to devastating national economic and fluctuating global markets and the lure of the city. Eldah Gumpo, Sikhanyisiwe Ndlovu and Josephine Siziba, for example, have dedicated themselves to working in the fields and eating from their sweat. But they sadly acknowledge that they have had to adapt to declining returns for the crops they used to sell. Market prices have dropped to almost non-profitable levels for smaller volumes. The market has also changed; the whites who used to buy delicacies like gooseberry are no longer there. Unemployment is also high in the city so everyone is now a vendor and the niche that Matopo farmers had has been snatched from them. “Viscose” is the new money maker but is also oversubscribed. Some of the elderly women also rely on remittances sent by their children to complement the meagre earnings from their trade.

Changing weather conditions have also been identified as causing declining crop output. Sweet potatoes did very well in wet conditions but Matopo is becoming drier. Maize is also suffering but farmers are not yet used to smaller grains; they still insist on growing maize which however has a higher failure rate (E. Gumpo, interview, November 14, 2015, J. Siziba, interview, May 8, 2015 and January 9, 2016 & S. Ndlovu, interview, May 1, 2015).

A final concern for these rural mothers has been their families' welfare should they pass away, their homes would become *unxuwa*, a ghost homestead. Certainly there are social problems. The bright lights of the city have captured the young people; deepening rural poverty buttressed by continued marginalisation of Matabeleland has caused a mass exodus of youths to Botswana and South Africa, leaving behind an elderly farming community whose strength is waning daily. Most of the fields I visited were not farmed to full potential; the elderly women stated that they were not strong enough to work very hard. Two of the thirteen homesteads within the Mission Farm are already deserted as the young people have neglected these homes after the deaths of their parents. There have been attempts to woo some of the young people back onto the farm, but the continued dearth of economic solutions to Zimbabwe's problems have made this an elusive dream for most parents. Essentially, the young people do not feel part of Zimbabwe and the

country offers no hope. All of Effie Moyo's children are either living in the city in Bulawayo or in South Africa and could not imagine living a life of rural suffering, no matter the promises of farm land (E. Moyo, *ibid.*).

In order to appeal to the younger generation, Effie Moyo is trying to convince her children to maintain a rural presence by allocating them pieces of land so that they can grow some crops. She is hopeful that one day they will eventually retire and come back to Matopo (E. Moyo, *ibid.*). Eldah Gumpo, convinced her son to construct a house on the farm so that he would be enticed to visit the farm more often and hopefully ultimately settle there (E. Gumpo, interview, November 14, 2015).

### **Conclusion**

Access, control and ownership of land remains elusive for the majority of women, while they continue to toil and till land that does not belong to them, all the while contributing to food production. The defunct national economy and varied climate has led to diminishing returns for women's hard labour. Women have traditionally been key in the management of the home and farm while men sought work away from home. This role has evolved overtime to allow working women to hire help for the farm to cover for their absence, a change from the traditional roles that forced women to remain in the rural areas. Social challenges such as the scourge of AIDS are faced by women as caregivers. In order to cope with the challenges faced, women have relied on remittances from their children and adopted conservation farming methods in order to deal with the dead economy and the changing climate.

It must be highlighted that the central role played by women in food production, management of home and farm, should be accompanied by increased access, control and ownership of the means of production, principally, the land. Access to finances to support women would also enhance their output. Importantly, in order to achieve environmental stewardship, moralising environmental decline should not be the ultimate goal; neither should be the imposition of foreign ideas of conservation. It is by building on indigenous knowledge, strengthening existing conservations actions that may seem archaic and old fashioned to the outsider, that a useful environmental consciousness amongst communities can be created. An acknowledgement of local initiatives is necessary to sustain any interventions. Listening and learning from people's stories of what



has happened to them and to the environment overtime affords one of the best windows and insights into environmental history.

If the aim of the environmental historian is to be objective, there should be no glossing over the environmental and social injustices that have characterised history. All discriminatory factors and norms should be exposed and explored so as to understand the full dialectical nature of the human-nature relationships in the context in which they occur. Power relations are central to understand how humans utilise nature for livelihoods: from those with the bare minimum to those with excess. However, this equation does not in any way suggest that the poor are responsible for environmental degradation as there is evidence that it those with means who often tend to want more!

## References

- Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace. (1997). *Report on the 1980s Disturbances in Matabeleland and the Midlands*. Harare: LRF
- Chitiyo, K.T. (2000). Land Violence and Compensation: Reconceptualising Zimbabwe's Land & War Veterans' Debate. *Track Two*, 9 (1), 2-17
- Davidson, H.F. (1915). *South and south central Africa: a record of fifteen years' missionary labors among primitive peoples*. Elgin Ill: Brethren Publishing House
- Duggan, W.R. (1980). The Native Land Husbandry Act of 1951 and the Rural African Middle Class of Southern Rhodesia. *African Affairs*, 79 (315), 227-240
- Embassy of Zimbabwe. (n.d). *Background to Land Reform in Zimbabwe*. Retrieved 2016/06/22 from [http://www.zimembassy.se/land\\_reform\\_document.html](http://www.zimembassy.se/land_reform_document.html)
- Hartmann, S. J. A. (1945). Ukucinja: The Feast of the First Fruits. *NADA*, 22, 14-17
- Krammer, E. (1997). The Early Years: Extension Services in Peasant Agriculture in Colonial Zimbabwe, 1925-1929. *Zambezia*, XXIV (ii), 159-179
- Loewen, R. (2005). The Quiet on the Land: The Environment in Mennonite Historiography. *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, 23, 151-164
- Mabhena, C. (2010). 'Visible Hectares, Vanishing Livelihoods': A case of the Fast Track and Reform and Resettlement Programme in southern Matabeleland – Zimbabwe. University of Fort Hare
- Mitman, G. (2013). Living in a Material World. *Journal of American History*, 100(1), 128-130
- Muthuki, J.M. (2006). Rethinking Ecofeminism: Wangari Maathai and The Green Belt Movement in Kenya: *Research Article submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree Master of Social Science (Gender Studies) in the Faculty of Humanities, Development and Social Sciences*. University of Kwazulu-Natal (Howard College Campus)
- Nash, L. (2013). Furthering the Environmental Turn. *Journal of American History*, 100(1), 131-135

- Presidential Land Review Committee. (2003). *Report of the Presidential Land Review Committee on the Implementation of the Fast Track Land Reform Programme, 2000-2002 ('The Utete Report')*. Retrieved from [http://www.sarpn.org/documents/d0000622/P600-Utete\\_PLRC\\_00-02.pdf](http://www.sarpn.org/documents/d0000622/P600-Utete_PLRC_00-02.pdf)
- Ranger, T. (1989). Whose Heritage? The Case of Matobo National Park. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 15(2), 217-249
- Ranger, T. (n.d). Interview with Denge Sibindi and Moses Maphosa. Retrieved from the NAZ, BOH/31
- Rifkind, M.L. (1968). *The Politics of Land in Rhodesia: A Study of Land and Politics in Southern Rhodesia with special reference to the Period 1930 – 1968*. University of Edinburgh
- Schwartz, G.L. (n.d). *Church and Mission in Central Africa: A Missiological Study in Indigenization*. Retrieved from <http://www.wmausa.org/wp-content/uploads/Church-and-Mission-in-Central-Africa-%E2%80%A8-A-Missiological-Study-in-Indigenization-A-Missiological-Study-in-Indigenization-By-Glenn-Schwartz.pdf>
- Shumba, D. (2011). Women and Land: A Study on Zimbabwe. *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa*, 13(7), 236-244
- Warren, K. (2000). *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It Is and Why It Matters*. Lahman. Boulder. New York. Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc.
- White, R. (1990). Environmental History, Ecology, and Meaning. *The Journal of American History*, 76(4), 1111-1116
- Wilson, K.B. (1995). 'Water Used to be scattered in the Landscape': Local Understandings of Soil Erosion and Land Use Planning in Southern Zimbabwe. *Environment and History*, 1(3), 281-296.