

## Gender equality and women empowerment on Sustainable Community Development in Zimbabwe.

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**ABSTRACT:** Gender inequality is the most persistent and pervasive global problem of the 21st century militating against the attainment of sustainable development in patriarchal societies. Several forums have noted the centrality of gender equality and concerns of women's empowerment to the achievement of sustainable development. Promotion of gender equality is thus an important part of any development strategy. Thus, the research focused on analysing how society perceives the concept of gender equality and women empowerment, factors that militate against the achievement of gender equality in the society and its role in sustainable development. In gathering information, the study employed in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. The findings of this paper indicate that gender equality improves people's participation in community development programmes and leads to healthy families and increased food productivity. The paper concluded that women empowerment and gender equality are essential tools in the achievement of sustainable development in Zimbabwe.

**KEY WORDS:** *gender; gender equality, community, empowerment, sustainable development.*

### I. INTRODUCTION

#### Background

UNESCO (2003) looks at gender equality as a situation whereby women and men have equal conditions for realising their full human rights and for contributing to, and benefiting from economic, social, cultural and political development. Furthermore, UNESCO (2000) also defines gender equality as the equality between men and women in developing their personal abilities and making choices without limitations set by stereotypes, rigid gender roles and prejudices. From the definitions given above, gender equality can then be taken to refer to the equal valuing by the society of the similarities and the differences of men and women and the role they play. Gender equality is a fundamental developmental catalyst in every society hence it is important to enable both men and women to participate equally in the society and the nation at large (United Nations, 2014). While progress has been made in trying to close the gender gaps especially in sub-Saharan Africa where close to 61% of the women are considered to have one of the highest labour force participation rates in the world and also where significant strides have been made in the political arena over the years as witnessed by the number of women occupying top decision making posts, most African women continue to face grim livelihoods as they are still discriminated against when it comes to issue of income and power. Thus, women in some parts of Africa are still being denied education and employment and also continue to have limited opportunities in trade and industry (World Bank, 2014). UNDP (2016) states that, African women across the board are being denied the same kind of economic, social and political opportunities that men enjoy. This reflects that the majority of women are lacking opportunities in accessing education, work and even health care facilities and services. Across Africa, gender equality has remained neglected as women are subjected to ill-treatment, socio-economic injustices, exploitation and physical and mental torture through not being given equal status in terms of education, health and employment (Anderson, 2012).

Anderson (2012) further indicates that globally, women face persistent gaps in accessing resources, knowledge and services and all these have been underpinned by persistent inequalities in rights with the male counterparts. Women especially those in the rural areas where patriarchal norms and values are still being upheld have low levels of income, limited access to education and health services, limited job security, as well as limited land and inheritance rights. In sub-Saharan Africa for example, issues of customary land tenure system exclude women from owning as well as controlling the land (African Development Bank, 2015). Thus, under many customary legal systems, women's rights to inherit land are restricted hence women become more vulnerable to dispossession of land especially after divorce or widowhood.

Furthermore, in sub-Saharan Africa for example, women only hold about 15% of the productive land, receive less than 10% of credits and less than 7% of extension services an indication that discrimination of women is actually rife in many patriarchal societies (Anderson, 2012). Thus, the African Development Bank (2015) states that women face an array of barriers such as restrictive cultural practices, discriminatory laws and highly segmented labour markets which restrict them from achieving their full potential. Chaudhry(2007)also notes that Pakistan, like many African societies, is a patriarchal society where women generally suffer discrimination in every field of their lives.

Despite the prevalence of gender inequalities across Africa, the African Development Bank (2015) indicates that a number of nations are making notable strides towards promoting gender equality and Zimbabwe is no exception. Countries such as South Africa and Namibia are considered to have some of the highest gender parity rates in Africa with Namibia even having a constitution that guarantees equality before the law and the right to non-discrimination on the basis of sex. Rwanda, Malawi and Mauritius are also in the top five of countries that are doing their best on gender equality with Zimbabwe ranked 7<sup>th</sup> out of the 54 countries in Africa with higher gender equality. However the ranking of Zimbabwe does not necessarily entail that it is now free from the prevalence of women discrimination and gender inequality as studies have shown that the patriarchal hegemony continue to prevail particularly within rural communities where cases of sexual violence and gender based violence against women are still on the rise. In such communities, women are still being accustomed to carry out assigned roles and responsibilities of which any deviation from these stereotypes normally results in the vilification and isolation from ones family and community at large. Thus most women in Zimbabwe are still not free to live and challenge collective subjective norms and values based on the power constructions of male domination. This is an indication that patriarchal societies are generally not free from gender disparities due to societal, cultural, demographic and even economic problems in such communities.

Shurugwi District in the Midlands Province is one such area in Zimbabwe where cases of women discrimination and gender inequality are still rampant. Shurugwi District is largely rural and as such, cases of women discrimination in the socio-economic and political spheres are quite noticeable as a result of the patriarchal norms and values that the society uphold. However, despite such rampant cases, Shurugwi District is fortunate to have a number of partners and organisations that are working in the area of promoting gender equality and women empowerment. Local development partners such as Caritas and Hand in Hand have all partnered with the Ministry of Women Affairs, Gender and Community Development in bank rolling a number of programmes aimed at promoting gender equality in the different wards of the district. Caritas is a development agency of the Catholic Church and it runs a programme in Shurugwi that seeks to economically empower rural women through the promotion of Self Help Groups ([www.caritas.org](http://www.caritas.org)). Also Hand in Hand (HIH) is a Non-Governmental Organisation that runs a programme in Shurugwi on eradicating poverty among the underprivileged in rural communities and it focuses more on the promotion of income generation through capacity building and empowerment of women and youths ([www.handinhand-sa.org](http://www.handinhand-sa.org)). The promotion of gender equality by the afore mentioned organisations is being done through mainstreaming of gender in all their programmes that included food security, child protection, Internal Savings and lending's as well as Water, Sanitation and Hygiene programmes. A number of methods have been used in creating gender equality awareness such as the use of community dialogue and discussions, commemorations of Women's Day, separate meetings for both men and women and some other participatory approaches. Thus, as a result of such methods and approaches, perceptions on gender equality in a number of households have been changed and developed for the betterment of the community. It is in light of the above observations that the research sought to give an in-depth analysis on how the promotion of gender equality and women empowerment is an important ingredient in the achievement of Sustainable Community Development and how it has worked in Ward 5.

## II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Promotion of gender equality is a pre-requisite in fulfilling the vision of sustainable development goals that also aim to promote and empower all women and girls so as to end poverty, hunger and violence. Gender equality is not only a goal in itself but rather, it is a critical component for the achievement of sustainable development the world-over, hence women and men across the board need to have the same kind of economic, social and political opportunities. Significant progress is being made in closing the gender disparities particularly in sub-Saharan Africa where the majority of men and women are not occupying equal positions when it comes to accessing resources, knowledge and other basic services. Despite the progress being made in sub-Saharan Africa of ending gender disparities, Zimbabwe is one country that continues to face a situation whereby the majority of women are being discriminated and excluded by their male counter-parts in the social, political as well as the economic realms of their lives all because of their gender. Shurugwi District in Zimbabwe is a predominantly traditional rural community and as such, it largely constitute of patriarchal norms and values hence a significant number of women in the district continue to face the challenge of not having the same rights with their male counter-parts when it comes to owning and controlling of productive resources. This is despite efforts by several government departments and organisations to stress on the importance of gender equality to

the sustainability of their societies. Thus, if meaningful development is to be realised in communities, there is therefore need for profound changes in the minds and hearts of people and in every structure of the society so that men and women fully engage to create the new social order of equality between the males and females, this will also enable societies to move towards sustainable livelihoods.

### III. LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Impact of Gender inequality on Community Development

Seidman (2006) asserts that in the twenty first century, claims for equality are generally acceptable as reasonable principles but the contradiction between the principle of gender equality and the demonstrable dominance of male privilege and values throughout the patriarchal society is still worrisome. The relationship of patriarchal institutions to issues concerning gender is crucial to the perpetuation of women's subordination hence gender inequality in Africa is considered to be persistent and refusing to go away. Thus, patriarchy, in practice, and through different strategies of maintaining its dominance, seems to operate to the same end in both the private and public sphere in most African nations. Strategies of exclusion and segregation are employed in households as well as in public structures to achieve the subordination of women.

Jayachandran (2014) adds that poor access to legal rights, sexual and reproductive health services, freedom of movement and political voice pose additional constraints for women in most patriarchal societies. Thus, patriarchal societies have disempowered many women from having adequate control especially over household decisions and actions. This calls for the need to shrink the differences as well as the inequalities between men and women in such societies.

The African Development Bank (2015) also states that across Africa, women and men often experience different opportunities, conditions and privileges due to different wages earned, differential access to education and that they are not generally always equal before the law. Hence, the social problems that disproportionately affect women as a result of gender inequalities such as high maternal mortality and violence against women destroy the human capital that is essential for the development of the community (African Development Bank, 2015). That is, when women in the community are illiterate, suffer from poor health and have little control over their fertility as a result of gender inequality, it is the whole community that pays the price as the effects of gender inequalities become obstacles to the development of the community.

Kabeer (2005) also observes that, the inequalities of women in one sphere have a likelihood of getting reproduced in other spheres of the society especially if such inequalities go unchallenged. This means that today's inequalities between men and women are translated into inequalities of tomorrow as daughters and girls inherit the same discriminatory structures that oppressed their mothers and women in their societies. Thus, gender inequality tends to compromise the development of the communities. In fact, communities that are regarded as poor tend to have cultural norms and values that exacerbate favouritism towards males (Jayachandran, 2015). This, however, is a testimony that any development strategy that neglects the need for enhancing the role of women cannot achieve comprehensive socio-economic development. Thus, the nexus of limited access to resources, inadequate health care and education, systematic discrimination and barriers to women participation in the community as a result of gender inequality exacerbate their poverty thereby undermining as well as eroding chances of sustainable development of the entire society.

In addition, Chaudhry (2007) indicates that in South Asia, as a result of notable gender discrepancies, women are suffering from elevated mortality rates that Sen (1990) has referred to as the "missing women". This shows that gender inequality has adverse impact on a number of valuable developmental goals for example gender inequality in education and access to productive resources prevents reduction in child mortality, fertility and expansion of education for next generations. Gender inequality also reduces economic growth by lowering the average level of human capital hence Chaudhry (2007) argues that for socio-economic development to be achieved in a particular community, development strategies should not overlook the need for enhancing and strengthening the role of women.

#### Gender equality and Sustainable Community Development in Africa

The above discussion helps to show that the status of women and their roles are important determinants of progress in any given society not just because women constitute the majority of human resources in the world but also because women bear the brunt of the daily struggle for survival of the whole household and the entire community (Robinson, 2015). Thus, the equality of status for both men and women has really become an important and burning issue. According to UNDP (2016), the role of women in development is considered an integral process of economic growth and social progress in the contemporary world. This is the case because it has been observed that, where women have equal opportunities just like their male counter-parts, they play a pivotal role especially in the eradication of poverty in communities hence calls have been louder for the need to champion gender equality in the whole of Africa.

Bwakali (2001) states that the meaning of gender equality is shrouded in confusion as some believe that gender equality entails women being able to do the same things that men do whereas some think that gender equality

means the subordination of men by women in everything. However, Bouta et al (2005) define gender equality as relating to the equality of opportunities such as equality of rewards for work done, equality in the access of human capital and other productive resources that enable opportunity and equality for both men and women. World Bank (2012) also looks at gender equality as a fundamental development objective that is essential in enabling women and men to participate equally in the society and in the economy. The afore highlighted definitions of equality are in line with the definition of UNICEF (2010) that acknowledges that gender equality is central to human development and to the attainment of the sustainable development goals that were adopted by World leaders in 2015. Thus, UNICEF (2010) further states that gender equality is achieved when the playing field for both men and women is levelled so as to ensure that all sexes have equal opportunities to develop their talents. However an analyses of the definitions provided reflects that, gender equality does not mean that women are to rule over men but rather, when talking of the struggle for gender equality, reference is made to the removal of all forms of discrimination that prevail especially against women in a bid to level the playing field for both men and women.

UNESCO (2003) also looks at gender equality as a situation whereby women and men need to have equal conditions for them to realise their full human rights and to contribute to and benefit from economic, social, cultural and political development. This reflects that the focus of gender equality is on the equal valuing by society of the similarities and the differences of men and women and the roles they play basing on women and men being full partners in their homes and community at large. Equality of women and men is considered to be a desirable state of affairs in order to achieve common good for all hence the need to empower women as they represent the greatest source of untapped potential in the global effort to eradicate poverty and advance collective prosperity thereby bringing in the concept of sustainable development. However, it is important to note that the empowerment of women requires profound changes in the minds and hearts of the people and in every structure of the society. This calls for the need for the full engagement of both men and women in the construction of the new social order. The African Development Bank (2015) adds that gender equality has three dimensions namely economic empowerment, human development and laws and institutions that promote gender equality. It further notes that through eliminating gender inequality and empowering women, African countries have the potential to raise the productivity of more than a billion people thereby helping in delivering a huge boost to the continent's developmental potential. Gender equality is considered to be key in achieving inclusive growth and building resilient societies hence the clarion call to level the playing field to enable women and men alike to contribute and benefit from social and economic development.

It is a reality that most governments in Africa are male-dominated and as such these governments are struggling to create conditions for the attainment of gender equality by removing legal barriers and at the same time changing the laws that tend to subordinate women. These governments have reacted to the calls and pressures from mostly women's organisations in their quest to achieve gender equality by designing policies and programmes relating to the general anti-sex discrimination laws. For example, the focus of these male-dominated governments has been on women's access to resources, property and basic information as well as access to basic services such as health and education. The Zimbabwean government, being one of the examples of governments that are male-dominated, enacted a number of laws to promote gender equality since the country attained its independence in 1980. Apart from Zimbabwe, countries that are male-dominated such as Burkina Faso, Madagascar, Malawi and Rwanda have even amended their constitutions and adopted laws that prohibit discrimination of women based on sex. Mulama (2011) indicates that for example, Rwanda's constitution was amended to provide for a quota system that reserves special seats for women both in the upper and lower houses and it is something that has seen the country recording 56.3% of members of Parliament being women as of 2009.

The United Nation Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA) has also noted that men's organisation have proved vital in the struggle for gender equality as they advocate for the removal of all forms of discrimination against women. In Uganda for example, UNFPA successfully partnered with male opinion leaders in the country's complex culture such as elders, kings, bishops and imams in order to promote healthier behaviours that help in ending harmful traditional practices that undermine and view women as second class citizens. In addition, Esplen (2008) notes that organisations such as the Instituto Promundo in Brazil, Sonke Gender Justice Network in South Africa and Padare in Zimbabwe are among some of the men's organisations that support young men in questioning harmful and discriminatory traditional gender norms in an attempt to promote gender sensitive behaviour and attitudes in the society.

UN economists note that amongst African countries that are promoting gender equality, Rwanda is one of the few countries that has managed to increase the level of its human development index through bridging the gender divide (Schlein, 2000). This reflects that, countries that invest heavily in gender equality perform better in human development, a testimony that investing in gender equality and women empowerment is not only a human rights issue but also a development imperative. Zimbabwe is also among the African countries that are doing well in promoting gender equality and is ranked 7<sup>th</sup> out of the 54 countries in Africa (African Development Bank, 2015). It is also important to note that through the promotion of gender equality, Zimbabwe is striving to

achieve a situation whereby both men and women will have access to land, credits, education and skills, health and fertility, personal safety and legal representation. In addition, education, employment and political participation have been considered to be key in achieving gender equality and empowering women (Chaudhry, 2007), and this is in line with the Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women which recognises gender equality as a developmental goal on its own right.

In relation to the above observations, UNDP (2016) further asserts that, when gender equality is considered a human rights issue, it then becomes to be recognised as an essential development goal on its own right and at the same time viewed as vital in accelerating sustainable development. This reflects that, when gender inequalities are addressed and when policies are reshaped in a society, women and girls can become catalytic agents of change when being equal partners with men in their quest for promoting development that is inclusive, just, equitable and sustainable. In view of this, one can note that success in eradicating poverty, promoting sustainable consumption and production patterns in a given locality can be better achieved through the engagement and participation of women. Similarly, Robinson (2015) argues that gender equality should be a concern for humanity as a human right issue and as such no society can develop economically, politically and socially while women and girls are being marginalised. Thus, the general observation among scholars is that, inclusive sustainable development can only be realised when all human rights, including gender equality are protected, respected and fulfilled.

### Setting

The study site for this research was Shurugwi District in the Midlands Province of Zimbabwe. The district consists of two local government arms namely Shurugwi Town Council, which is the local authority running the affairs of Shurugwi town, and Tongogara Rural District Council, which is the local authority running the affairs of rural Shurugwi in the district. The district has an estimated total population of 77570 people of which 37 696 are males and 39 874 are females. 56.2% of the population in the district are married people (Zimstat, 2012). Shurugwi District has been chosen for the study because it is largely a traditional rural society where patriarchal norms are largely visible/ noticeable and because of that, a number of communities in the district experience high levels of poverty as a result of gender inequalities. The central focus of the study is on analysing how gender inequality affects sustainable development initiatives of rural communities within the households and the community of Ward 5 in Tongogara rural district.

### Research Design

A case study of ward 5 in Shurugwi District was used as the research design in analysing the importance of gender equality as a development paradigm towards the achievement of sustainable development within rural communities. A case study design is a qualitative research method. According to Magwa and Magwa (2015) a case study involves research that focuses on a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real life context thus, the study focused on how gender equality would promote sustainable community development in the real life context of communities in Ward 5 of Shurugwi District. Qualitative research is a discursive and interpretive study whereby in-depth interviews with key informants as well as focus group discussions are conducted especially to explore the inner experiences of participants while at the same time enabling the researcher to take a holistic and comprehensive approach to the study of particular phenomena (Corbin and Strauss, 2015). According to Rubin and Rubin (2012), in-depth interviews are a powerful method for generating description and interpretation of the people's social world and as such are a core qualitative research tool. Hennink (2007) also asserts that focus group discussions fall under qualitative research and involve discussing a host of issues with pre-determined participants with the motive of understanding the meanings and interpretations of the selected group of people. Thus, in this study, data was collected through in-depth interviews with key informants such as kraal heads, government employees and staff from local NGOs whereas focus group discussions were held with local community members at village levels.

### Population and Sampling

Staff from local Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), Ministry of Women Affairs, Gender and Community Development, households in Ward 5, kraal heads and councillors constituted the population of this study. The sample size was a total of 56 respondents and the sample consisted of forty eight research participants from the local community whereby sixteen local community members were derived from a single village of which out of the seven villages in the ward, only three villages participated in the study. The sample also included one councillor from the ward, three village heads, two officials from local NGOs that is one from Caritas and the other one from Hand in Hand (HIH) and the two ward officers from the Ministry of Women Affairs, Gender and Community Development. The study made use of the purposive sampling technique in selecting the ward and the respondents. According to Oppong (2013) purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique that gives the researcher room to select the subjects of the study basing on their experience and knowledge on the area that is being researched on. Thus through the use of the purposive sampling

technique, the researcher saved time by directly targeting groups of people with the relevant knowledge on the subject matter that was under investigation. The researcher also obtained the sampling frame especially of the villages in the wards from the District Administrator's office.

#### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

##### Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Sixty six percent (37) of the participants were married, Eighteen percent (10) widowed and the remaining sixteen percent (9) were either divorced or had never been married. Furthermore, 26 of the participants were males and 30 were females. The composition of the sample enabled the study to have detailed and more balanced views on gender from both males and females from the different categories.

**Table 1: Understanding of Gender equality by the Community**

Understanding of gender equality	Frequency	Percentage
Same treatment between men and women	17	30%
Empowerment of women	20	36%
Absence of discrimination against both women and men	14	25%
Women to have power over men	5	9%
Totals	56	100%

Information gathered from the participants in the study (Table1) shows that a number of participants were at least aware of the meaning of gender equality. 30% of the participants revealed that gender equality implied homogeneity between men and women on social, political and economic opportunities, 36% indicated that gender equality is all about empowering women whereas 25% indicated that gender equality is about the absence of discrimination against women by the male counterparts in the community. Only 9% of the participants indicated that gender equality refers to a situation whereby women should have more power over men. From the information gathered, the study found that the majority of participants in the community of Ward 5 had an idea of what gender equality is all about although the majority of participants (36%) thought that when talking of gender equality focus is on the empowerment of women only. However, most of the sentiments that were aired out were in line with the UNESCO's (2003) definition that gender equality refers to the equal valuing by society of the similarities and the differences of men and women and the roles they play, that different behaviour, aspirations and needs of women and men are considered, valued and favoured equally without any discrimination. Thus, discrimination against women is taken as violating the principles of equality and respect for human dignity (UNESCO, 2003).

##### Gender equality and Poverty Alleviation

Results of the study indicated that promotion of gender equality is an important part of the development strategy that seeks to enable all people, women and men alike, to escape poverty and improve their standard of living. Participants in the study with special reference to the ward officers from the Ministry of Women Affairs, Gender and Community Development further revealed that such a situation in their community whereby men and women sought to escape poverty together had been facilitated by the change in the division of labour in the homes where couples are now taking care of house budgets together, deciding how costs are divided and what they can invest in from the incomes they generated from their farm produces and other non-farming activities that generate income for the family. This however shows that through different programmes on gender issues in the community, husbands and wives in Ward 5 have evolved as families to work together especially on generating income from their fields and gardens and also from rearing of small livestock such as chickens, rabbits and goats. What this shows is that these two groups are now working together, sharing the work and making joint decisions for the betterment of their households and the community at large as boundaries demarcating some economic activities for both men and women in this particular community have been pulled down and the participants attributed the development to the different programmes on advocacy and income generation that were initiated by organisations such as Caritas and HIH in the ward. The study also found information from councillor that when incomes increased in the family from the contribution of both the husband and wife, women then tend to be treated with more respect by their male counterparts. In this regard, it was further indicated by the Field Officer for HIH that development intervention for their organisation in Ward 5 focuses more on practical gender needs where promotion of women incomes and ownership of material assets is emphasised of which this is done with the intention of reducing poverty in the community.

The findings of the study are also supported by the views of UNDP (2016) that in communities where women have rights equal to their male counterparts, such women are in most cases better educated and have greater

access to land, jobs and financial resources. Thus, gender equality in both the family and community translates to better prospects and greater well-being for the entire family thereby helping in reducing poverty even for future generation. The study therefore noted from the participants that gender equality is viewed as a crucial condition for inclusive democratic and sustainable development as participants indicated that it used to be a rare scenario for women in the community to own livestock just like their male counterparts owing to the deep rooted patriarchal norms and values that used to engulf the whole community but through initiatives of the government through the Ministry of Women Affairs, Gender and Community Development together with programmes offered by local development partners on gender development, the majority of women in the ward are now owners of livestock such as goats, sheep and cattle. Thus, the promotion of gender equality in Ward 5 had translated to ownership of some productive resources by women. In addition, one of the kraal head that participated in the study also revealed that the community was able to narrow the gender gap in most productive sectors such as in agricultural productivity.

### **Gender equality and the Promotion of Education**

The households that took part in the study from the three villages revealed that they were no longer treating their daughters as second fiddle to their male counterparts since they were now being afforded equal opportunities to access primary and secondary education as well as tertiary education. This has been further enhanced by Development partners in the ward such as Caritas and HIH who work guided by the Sustainable Development Goal number five that focuses on the elimination of gender disparity in all spheres of life. What this shows is that girls and boys in the community now have equal access to education and it is something that the community believes will have the potential to lead to improved literacy rates in the community and also that incidences of early marriages especially among the teen girls can be significantly reduced as a result. This was even confirmed by the ward councillor who happened to be a School Development Committee member at the local school that school enrolment at Jongwe Primary in ward 5 reflects that issues of gender are now strongly being taken into consideration among different households in his ward as more girls especially in the higher grades are being kept enrolled in the school unlike in the past whereby preference was given to the boy child. Such benefits of gender equality in education have been supported by Scott (2012) who indicated that educated women are less likely to marry early and more so against their will, that they are less likely to die in childbirth, more likely to have healthy babies and that there are also likely to send their children to school. As for the adolescent girls, Scott (2012) further indicates that if they attend school, this will delay marriages and child bearing at a tender age hence helping in reducing their vulnerability to diseases such as HIV/AIDS. This was buttressed by the Field Officer for Caritas who indicated that if given the opportunity to learn how to read and write, girls in the ward will in future, as wives have their voices heard by the community thereby promoting sustainable development in the community as both men and women have a role to contribute equally to community development.

### **Gender equality and Improved Community Health**

The study also revealed that gender equality is indeed an essential ingredient on issues of health. The study discovered from the focus group discussions held that through the promotion of gender equality, women in communities of Ward 5 were empowered to have control over their sexuality and reproductive health. Most participants in the study particularly women indicated that their husbands have opened up to the idea that they should have decision-making powers over their sexuality so as to enhance and improve their access to health services. Thus, the study noted that if gender equality is guaranteed, then it can go a long way in reducing maternal mortality as women have easy access to good modern health facilities and in a way this will also fully equip women and the community at large to combat child killer diseases.

It was also revealed in the study that in the absence of gender equality in communities, practices such as child marriages among girls, and sexual and physical violence adversely affected women's health thereby increasing chances of maternal mortality. Thus, the study revealed that access to health care and reproductive well-being showed a clear interconnection between gender issues and vulnerability of women especially to issues of poverty that undermine sustainable community development.

Furthermore, the study found that households with both educated fathers and mothers have better knowledge of nutrition, hygiene and other practices related to child care. Hence the enhancement of women's capacities in education at an equal base with men was found leading to reduction in infant and child mortality, improved nutritional status in the household and these had a marked impact on poverty reduction thereby promoting sustainable development in the community. The findings of the study are actually in line with those of OECD (2012) that identified that economic empowerment especially of women is a prerequisite for sustainable development, pro-poor growth as well as the achievement of all the Millennium Development goals of 2000. Thus, gender equality and empowerment of women were viewed in the study as catalysts for multiplying development efforts aimed at reducing poverty.

### **Gender equality and the Absence of Violence in the Community**

Information gathered from the study also shows that gender equality in the community helped in reducing conflict and violence within a number of households, especially between husbands and wives. Thus, the study through information gathered from the kraal heads revealed that improved household material wealth and food security as a result of the prevalence of the promotion of gender equality in Ward 5 of Shurugwi rural had greatly contributed in reducing gender based violence. Furthermore, the Field Officer for Caritas also indicated that, where poverty levels are reduced as a result of husbands and wives contributing income to the household, the couples tend to have a greater sense of purpose and more hope for the future of their families, something that will then prevent them from emotional stress and also from engaging in domestic violence. Participants in the study also highlighted that the group meetings and trainings programmes on gender issues facilitated by Caritas as well as HIH have enabled them both as men and women to be self-confident and to have a greater feeling of solidarity in standing up for colleagues who happen to be victims of domestic violence in the community. It was further indicated in the interviews that were held with kraal heads that when income increased in the family as a result of the different empowerment programmes for both men and women which are being implemented in the ward by local development partners, women as wives in households are treated with greater respect by their male counterparts and this enabled them to participate freely in community meetings and other economic engagements. Thus, the study noted that as a result of the prevalence and promotion of gender equality in communities, men abandon their opposition to women's involvement in community programmes and projects. The findings of the study are in tandem with the study by United Nations (2011) where it was found that gender equality promotes meaningful and informed participation of women in decision-making at both the family and community as well as at higher levels of social administration. Furthermore, Scott (2012) also found that improved household material wealth and food security especially as a result of the promotion of gender equality contributed greatly in reducing domestic violence.

### **Challenges faced in Promoting Gender equality**

The study revealed that in as much as the community had warmed up to issues related to gender equality promotion, some of the participants in the study could not agree to the notion that men and women should have the same rights to own and control productive resources such as land. The major argument that was given by the male participants in the focus group discussions held was that, husbands are the head of the household hence they need to own such resources so as to be in a position to fend for the family and also to earn respect from their children. Thus, the study revealed that patriarchy had been entrenched in the community to further the subordination of women where customary laws are even used to reinforce such social injustices of gender inequalities. The findings of the study are in line with the sentiments of Burstein (1994) who shows that it is the customary laws in the patriarchal society that are used to promote male dominance where productive resources are owned and controlled by male members of the family. Furthermore, it was indicated by some participants that married women cannot be considered to be heads of households in the same way as men and this explained why some men in the community maintained their control by excluding women from accessing essential productive resources such as land and other financial resources. This confirms the findings by UNESCO (2000) that gender discrimination frustrates women's efforts of participating in the economic system of the community in the sense that in the majority of cases, women have lower access to the financial systems and other productive assets.

## **V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The study concludes that the promotion of gender equality helps in yielding profound and long lasting social as well as economic returns to the community that was under study as gender equality is a positive forward looking vision for Africa's development. Gender equality was taken as key in achieving inclusive growth and resilient communities in the sense that the study found that the promotion of gender equality facilitated access to education for both girls and boys in the community. This was noted to have an impact on reducing incidences of early marriages especially among girls. Furthermore, issues of domestic violence were all noted to be on the decline as a result of the promotion of gender equality among the different members of the community hence gender equality was viewed as an essential ingredient in the achievement of the sustainability of both communities and nations. However, despite the promotion of gender equality in Ward 5 by the Ministry of Women Affairs, Gender and Community Development in partnership with Caritas and some other Development Organisations, the study also noted that there still exists some obstacles to the total achievement of equality between men and women and examples of such obstacles were all linked to the notion that the society itself was patriarchal in nature where the male members are the dominant figures in the families.

The study however recommends that there is need for the government to enact laws that are essential in achieving real equality between men and women and that representation of women especially in public institutions should be guaranteed from the grassroots if gender equality is to be fully attained. Furthermore,

communities should come up with strategies and reforms that promote men and women to have equal access to productive resources by challenging harmful and discriminatory values of the patriarchal society that promote persistent and increasing burden of poverty on women. Also government departments need to partner with a number of organisations that advocate for gender equality in all their programmes so as to build a culture of peace and cooperation in the minds of both men and women with emphasis being on the recognition of women's capacity to contribute towards the development of communities.

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