

# **Gender and Work - Past, Present and Future: The Situation of Rural Mozambican Women at Mazowe River Bridge Camp in Zimbabwe**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Work is an essential part of human life which determines one's status in society. It is usually gender-determined, especially in rural communities where men and women have separate distinct roles which they have to perform.

This paper is based on a small-scale study of Mozambican refugee women conducted at Mazowe River Bridge camp (Zimbabwe). In the research, the roles and status of women prior to displacement and currently (in the camp) were examined. An effort was also made to project the roles and status of women in future Mozambique after repatriation. Some of the findings support Makanya's (1990) findings in her case-study on issues of assistance to Mozambican refugee women at Tongogara camp. This study indicated that Mozambican women take the major burden of responsibility for domestic and other chores in the camps, as they used to in Mozambique. An inequitable division of labour between men and women persists.

Currently a number of men are also leaving the camp to look for employment, but due to high and rising unemployment in Zimbabwe and police round-ups of Mozambican refugees who leave the camps, the majority find themselves back in the camps again. Their role as family providers is greatly reduced. However men have been and are still being regarded as decision-makers, which leaves women in a very vulnerable, dependent position. The future of the Mozambican women is likely to change due to the skills currently being imparted to them in the camps. The women are likely to emerge and be recognised as people who can work outside the home. However, this would become more possible if women are supported not only with material and financial resources, but also with opportunities and positive attitudes towards them.

## **Introduction**

Mozambique is on the east coast of Southern Africa and shares its border with Tanzania (north), Malawi and Zambia (north-west), Zimbabwe (west), South Africa and Swaziland (south) and to the east there is the Indian Ocean.

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After its independence, in 1975, a civil war between the FRELIMO government and the opposition group, Mozambique National Resistance Movement, (RENAMO) erupted. By 1982 civil strife had intensified, especially in the rural areas and this prompted the massive exodus of people into neighbouring countries, Zimbabwe included. This was further aggravated by famine which was caused by drought. It should be noted, therefore, that the Mozambican refugees in Zimbabwe (and other neighbouring countries) are not only victims of political instability, but also of famine.

The influx of Mozambicans into Zimbabwe started in 1982, and this was followed by the Refugees Act which was passed in 1983. Soon after, the Zimbabwe Government, with the assistance of UNHCR, set up structures, in the form of refugee camps, to accommodate those asylum seekers who have continued to come across. Today there are about 138,000 Mozambican refugees in Zimbabwe. They are accommodated in five refugee camps, namely Tongogara, Mazowe River Bridge, Nyamatikiti, Nyangombe and Chambuta. These are situated near the north-eastern, eastern and south-eastern border of Zimbabwe and Mozambique.

This study was conducted at Mazowe River Bridge camp which is the second largest in population. There were a number of constraints in conducting the study, which included lack of financial resources to hire research assistants in the gathering of data. This resulted in a minor research being undertaken of which a sample of 200 women (2,5%) instead of an intended 800 women (10%) of the total female population in the camp was studied. The other problem was the outbreak of cholera which led to a quarantine of the camps in order to contain the situation. This delayed the study considerably.

## **General Camp Situation**

Mazowe River Bridge, which is the focus of this study, is north-east of Zimbabwe near the border of Zimbabwe and the Tete province of Mozambique. Most of the refugees in this camp are drawn therefore from Tete in the districts of Changara, Moatize, Magore and Cabora Basa. The population at Mazowe camp today (March 1993) stands at 35,271 and is distributed as follows:

**Table showing the distribution of the refugee population at Mazowe River Bridge Camp according to age and sex (March 1993)**

AGES	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
0-12 months	2 294	2 312	4 606
1- 4 years	2 618	3 535	6 153
5-17 years	4 083	6 126	10 209
18 years +	<u>6 143</u>	<u>8 160</u>	<u>14 303</u>
<b>Totals</b>	<b>15 138</b>	<b>20 133</b>	<b>35 271</b>

The figures above show that females outnumber men in any age group. This is a common phenomenon worldwide in a refugee situation. For example, the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children (1990) reports that refugee women and children constitute as much as 85% of the estimated 15 million refugees worldwide.

The set-up in the camp resembles rural life, with pole and *dagga*, or brick huts thatched with grass. However, the huts are very crowded which greatly reduces family privacy. These huts are grouped into villages to imitate community structures found in rural Mozambique. Basic needs like food, clothing and shelter are provided. This in a way creates a dependency syndrome on the part of the refugees.

Unlike in Mozambique where they tilled land for survival, the refugees have very little land to till. They make use of small areas between huts and behind the villages to grow a few things for individual family consumption, and in some cases for sale. Some of these pieces of land are hardly four square metres in size.

Piped water is provided at numerous water points and this reduces the burden of walking long distances for water. However, much time is still spent in queuing for water at these water points.

Collection of firewood is an activity which consumes a lot of time for women. Due to the large demand for firewood, the forest around the camp has been liberally depleted. Consequently refugees are forced to walk long distances in search for firewood. In view of this fuel problem, government authorities, non-governmental organisations and UNHCR formed a consortium at the beginning of 1992 to tackle the problem (see Refugees, 1992). This has resulted in the introduction of fuel efficient stoves called *tsotso* stoves which reduce the consumption of firewood by 60%.

## **The Roles and Status of Rural Mozambican Women Before Displacement**

The people of Mozambique are largely patrilineal and there is male dominance in their society. Even in the matrilineal tribes of Macua and Ajas, men are still expected to make major decisions in the households. Women are generally deprived in numerous ways. They lack education and decision-making powers and are not expected to take up formal employment. Work is gender-divided and women are expected to work in and around the home, performing activities like cooking, cleaning the home, caring for children, husbands and members of the extended family, and they are also expected to work in the fields. Similarly, in a study at Tongogara camp (Zimbabwe), Makanya (1990) found out that women are expected to take up care-giving roles associated with cooking for the household and caring for children and husbands.

In this present study all the women interviewed said that they worked in the fields to produce the maize and millet which constitute their staple food. Yet of all these women, only 50% were helped by their husbands in the fields. This is an indication that Mozambican women play a vital role in food production although this contribution is often denied or not recognised. This is why women have been referred to as the "invisible earners" (Wiest et al, 1992).

It should be noted that even the women themselves have been socialised to underplay their roles in the households. Initially 80% of the women said they did nothing while in Mozambique. There is failure to recognise their production, reproduction and care-giving roles as important, because they have been brought up to see this as an obligation (ie taken for granted).

This study revealed that the Mozambican refugee women who were interviewed have had very little or no education at all. 40% had never been to school while 30% have had only two years of primary education. Of the latter, 5% are hardly literate. Given this level of education it can be expected that Mozambican women are disadvantaged in social and economic issues. This reduces their opportunity to make decisions and hence 100% of the women under study stressed that decision-making is for men only. One respondent actually said: "A home in which decisions are made by a woman is not a home". Women without husbands had to fall back on their fathers or male relations in search for a male figure. This clearly reflects that women in Mozambique have been socialised to regard themselves as inferior to men. Taft (1987) states that lack of adequate decision-making power and control over resources by women are a cause of their marginalisation.

In the 40% of cases where husbands worked away from home while in Mozambique, women reported that they still consulted them for major decisions in the home. It is also worth noting that only 1% of these women visited their husbands at their places of work. This highlights, therefore, the submissive role that women played by permanently staying in the rural homes without outside exposure. Nevertheless women themselves did not see it in this way but regarded formal employment or work outside the home as men's prerogative.

It is apparent, therefore, that the status of women while in Mozambique was inferior to that of men. Due to the cultural beliefs which placed women as subordinate to men, the women were denied access to education, formal employment and exposure to the outside world. They stayed in the rural areas to do all the hard work in and around the home. It appears that these women have been socialised to accept their inferior position to men as natural and to regard men as superior beings on whom they depend.

## **Mozambican Women in the Camp**

The camp set-up is different from life in rural Mozambique in terms of the density of the population. In rural Mozambique, huts were not as closely spaced as in the camp. Another new development is the free provision of food, clothing, piped water and the opportunity to train in various skills. Among some of the skills offered at Mazowe River Bridge camp are: cutting and sewing, knitting, crocheting, weaving, poultry, vaseline and soap-making, carpentry, metal-work, building, painting, fence-making, plumbing and black-smithing.

The Mozambican refugees have therefore been relieved of the burden of searching for basics and also accorded an opportunity to acquire skills in various trades.

The study focused on finding out how this new arrangement has changed the roles and status of women. It was observed that women in the camp still perform domestic duties such as cooking, caring for children and husbands, general cleaning, fetching water and collecting firewood. In fact, women have contributed greatly in the depletion of forests around camps, but not out of choice. They have to prepare food for their families and since they have no alternative sources of fuel, they have to resort to the use of wood. They have also acquired a new role and responsibility of queuing for food rations. About 40% of the women reported that it was solely their duty to queue for food even when their husbands have nothing to do. Opportunities for men to fend for the family have been reduced because the camp is like a closed environment and many basic needs are provided. However, men leave the camp in an attempt to search for jobs outside the camp (10% reported that their husbands had secured employment outside the camp).

A notable observation is the fact that 20% of women remarried in the camp within a year or so after losing their husbands. (These women had lost their husbands mainly through war-related deaths and separation during exile). Security was cited as a reason for remarriage. The women mentioned that culturally women are not respected if they have no husbands. Remarriage was therefore a search for a head of the family who would make major decisions for the family. Kalyati (1990) in her study of Mozambican refugees in Malawi found that women without husbands have problems in building houses or performing other tasks considered to be for men. Although this was not highlighted in the study, it could be another reason for marriage or remarriage. Wiest et al (1992) also found that in societies with strong patriarchal ideologies, such as in Mozambique, a woman abandoned is a woman scorned. Women in these circumstances find themselves with the burden of children and heading families. It is therefore understandable why women quickly remarry.

While in Mozambique quite a sizable amount of time was spent on tilling the land to produce food. The camp situation has greatly reduced this activity for two main reasons. The first one is that there is lack of available land to till. However, the women admitted that they have small pieces of land in-between huts or outside villages to grow crops in order to supplement the food that is provided, to break the monotony of the food provided in the camp and for sale. The second reason is that the assurance of provision of food in the camp reduces the necessity for providing oneself with food. It should also be noted that men are mainly involved in the village administration, security and building activities. These are seen as domains for men.

Men are still perceived as decision-makers. In interviews with women, it was apparent that the status of men as heads of families and decision-makers is a taken-for-granted virtue. The high status accorded to men is evident in their predominant participation in camp leadership. Similarly in Tongogara refugee camp, Makanya (1990) noted that women were scarcely represented in the administration bodies and yet they were in the majority. This is further evidence, therefore, that not much has changed in terms of the position and status of women. Pittaway (1990) argues that excluding women in the delivery and planning of delivery of assistance measures often leaves them open to abuse.

The area of skills training provides evidence of the low perception that women still have of themselves. Women were found to dominate in such skills as sewing, knitting, crocheting, soap and vaseline-making. These skills help them within the home, although only 10% said these skills help them to generate income. Skills like building and carpentry are hardly taken by women because they are regarded as male skills.

The special teacher training programme offered to Mozambicans who have attained grade six or better is dominated by men. This is because women do not meet the necessary academic requirements. In the interviews, it was evident that women do not even entertain the idea of being trained as teachers. Only one divorcee said she would be interested in the training programme if she is offered a place. This particular woman has completed grade five (primary education). It could be inferred that her level of education (comparatively higher than others) and her marital status have helped her to realise that even women can take up trades/training leading to formal employment.

There has been an effort to provide education to the refugees in the form of adult literacy classes. However the demands of domestic tasks are an obstacle for most women in attending adult literacy classes or skills training programmes (Refugees, 1992; Pittaway, 1990). There is also a high drop-out rate of women, some of them as soon as they master basic numeracy and literacy. However, Makanya (1990) argues that literacy classes are not good enough as they provide just bare literacy and numeracy. This is not sufficient to qualify women for programmes such as teacher training and also for meaningful participation in the administrative organs in the camp. Some of the village leadership positions would need someone with some literacy and numeracy. Women are therefore not motivated to take part in camp administration and teacher training because of lack of education.

Although Pittaway states that work, for the "traumatised" women, is seen as a way of reclaiming self-respect and self-esteem, these values can only be attained if these women are viewed in a more positive manner.

## **Mozambican Women in Future - Back in Mozambique**

In view of the current peace talks taking place in Mozambique and the ceasefire agreement signed in Rome last year (1992), there is hope that sooner or later the Mozambican refugees will go back to their country.

In the interviews it came out clearly that women want to go back to rural areas. This is obviously because they are familiar with a rural set-up. It is also because they do not feel comfortable meeting the challenges of the urban areas, which demand education for one to get employed. Women still perceive themselves as home and child minders, who are expected to be at home while men work in towns, mines and the like.

A small fraction of women (5%), postulated that the skills gained would help them to generate income. The rest of the women indicated that they would either

use these skills within their households, or they were uncertain how these skills would help them. Yet as Kalyati (1990) writes, it is hoped that the knowledge gained will also be useful when they return to Mozambique in future.

It should be realised, however, that these women left Mozambique due to forces beyond their control. These forces had turned life into a nightmare and for most of these women they are fearful of the unknown. It is even difficult for them to perceive a 'normal' life again. In addition to this, women have had very little education to help them feel confident in penetrating into the 'male domains'. Women too have not been educated about their rights and so they still perceive men as superior to them. If nothing is done about this now, women will continue to regard themselves as inferior to men.

Camp life has to a certain extent taken off the burden of working in the fields to produce food. It has also reduced some of the burdens of work around the home because of limited space in the camp. On return to Mozambique, the heavy load will fall on women again. For those who were children when they came as refugees, it would be even more difficult to cope. However, because of the exposure (in the camp) to skills and adult literacy classes, some women might find themselves utilising these skills to generate income. Presently this might not be possible to perceive, but their future experiences might teach them to develop alternative additional ways of making a living.

## Summary and Conclusions

The marginalisation of refugee women has been a phenomenon which has caused concern. It was noted in the study that the roles and status of Mozambican refugee women have experienced little significant change from their previous roles and status before displacement. Culture has conveniently been preserved to keep women in their subservient place. The camp situation has perpetuated the submissive roles and low status of women by failing to provide them with proper school education and also not making them aware of their rights.

The roles of women are similar to those performed in Mozambique, that is, care-giving and to a lesser extent, food production. Although the role of food production has been greatly reduced, women find themselves having to queue for the food rations. Women still find themselves concerned and expected to worry over what the next meal would be.

On the other hand, the role of men as bread winners has become insignificant as basic food is provided for in the camp. Although most men try to get employment outside the camp or do odd jobs, this is on a small-scale - because jobs are hard to come by and also the camp situation does not provide many opportunities.



However in spite of this, men are still regarded as decision-makers in both their households and camp leadership. It has been noted that despite the fact that women are in greater numbers, men consume much of refugee aid. Targeting women has become a priority theme for the decade by the Commission on the Status of Women in conjunction with UNHCR. However unless some of the oppressive cultural practices are done away with and women are also educated, then improving their status is still a long way away. Given their present status in the camp, Mozambican refugee women can go back to their country still regarding themselves and regarded by men as lower in status.

## **Recommendations**

In the light of the findings of the study, the following strategies are recommended in order to improve the roles and status of Mozambican women:

1. Women need to be educated beyond just basic literacy and numeracy. This would help them to have a better understanding and perception of their role and status in life.
2. There is need to provide women not only with skills designed to generate income, but also ways to manage income-generating projects. As Rintala (1992) indicates, there should be empowerment of women, not only with domestic skills, but other marketable skills.
3. Government, independent bodies and repatriation teams should assist women who have acquired skills with resources to start their projects. Skills without resources to initiate projects are not very helpful.
4. An effort should be made to make the number of women and men in camp leadership proportional to the general numbers of the women and men respectively. This would greatly help to incorporate women's issues into the various programmes. Pittaway (1990) argues that women's issues usually come as an afterthought and not an integral part of service-delivery and planning. If women are in the leadership positions their issues are likely to get priority.
5. There is need for ongoing research on the effectiveness of programmes offered to refugee women. This would help to improve services and programmes.

6. Men should be educated to realise that women can take decision-making roles and other roles currently regarded as men's and perform them equally well. Such *conscientisation* is necessary in a situation where change in attitudes has to be effected. Rintala (1992) argues that men should be educated to realise that women can take more active roles in planning and decision-making.
7. Government and independent bodies working with refugees should not only pay lip-service to the notion of women's issues (Pittaway, 1990). If such bodies are seen to effect what they say, it helps both refugee men and women to take these issues seriously.

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