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## AN IMPACT EVALUATION OF GOVERNMENT-LED SOCIAL PROTECTION FOR WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN CHIRUMANZU-ZIVAGWE DISTRICTS, ZIMBABWE

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### ABSTRACT

*An impact evaluation on Government-led social protection for women and children was carried out in Chirumanzu and Zivagwe districts south west of Zimbabwe. The objectives were; to gather statistics of women and children in the districts, to explore diverse social protection programmes for women and children, to explore the challenges faced by women and children in attaining sufficient livelihoods. Finally, to determine social protection programmes for women and children for nutrition and physical well-being. A survey method was used to gather data through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and semi-participant observations with the use of interview tool guides. Data was collected from 60 women and 50 children and 10 key informants drawn from representatives of all stakeholders totalling 120 study participants. The study established that various social protection programmes are provided for people in general and yet very little has been done to address the problem of elderly women and children in particular who appear to experience multifaceted social protection challenges more than their counterparts. This study concluded that there is need for multi-stakeholder approach to address the problems of women and children. The study is calling on Government and international agencies in programming to intervene through reinforcing social protection policies and programmes in order to alleviate absolute poverty amongst women and children in Zimbabwe.*

**KEY TERMS:** Social Protection, Women, Children, Poverty, Chirumanzu, Zivagwe, Zimbabwe

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## INTRODUCTION

This research carried out an impact evaluation on Government-led social protection for women and children in Zimbabwe. The target population was drawn from Chirumanzu, Zivagwe and Shurugwi districts; a province south west of Zimbabwe. The sampled population was poor women and children. Stratified and later convenience purposive sampling was used to collect data. The method was taking into consideration the time and costs required to gather data and the need to minimize inaccuracy by at least having a larger sample. Data analysis was prepared using Statistical Computer Software Package (SPSS) and later triangulated. Results, discussions, recommendations/implications for social work and conclusion will be presented.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Zimbabwe was once considered a food basket for the region except that cyclical droughts and socio-economic hardships triggered a series of downstream shocks which require urgent interventions. So stakeholders have been committed into implementing social protection programmes in rural districts south west of Zimbabwe. The country's economy has been characterized by macro-economic imbalances such as high budget deficits, balance of payment deficits, inflation and low economic growth. Cyclical droughts and food shortages have been impacting negatively on women and children who are continually trapped into social protection barriers.

Thus, women and children face difficulties in achieving social protection opportunities due to poverty and yet in the past, very little have been done to address the problem. They face many dangers, especially those who live in remote drought stricken remote areas without any social protection programmes to sustain them. Women as a rule do not legally possess land and/or any form of social protection as they are regarded as strangers in families where they are married. So, women they become marginalised and discriminated against their social protection entitlements during planning, designing and implementation of formal social protection programmes. This research asks remarkable research questions which are; What are the circumstances that lead to their status? What are the challenges experienced by women and children and what can be done for them? What are the gender mainstreaming social protection policies available for women and children to enhance their life situations?

Trustworthy information on women and children is well acknowledged by International agencies in programming except that very little is known about social protection programmes available for women and children. So far, available researches show that limited work has been carried out to address these problems. Sometimes women and children in remote communities look as if they have been overlooked; marginalised and discriminated against their social protection entitlements. However, unless governments and intergovernmental organizations in programming have conclusive proof that this is not the case, the complexity and diversity circumstances of this particular group remains problematic? Governments and inter-governmental organizations in the past have tended to respond to the plight of rural communities in general, except that it is not lucid how social protection programmes of women and children are prioritized. This study seeks to make an impact evaluation of Government-led social protection programmes, explore the challenges faced by women and children, finally to determine social protection programmes that could benefit women and children in Chirumanzu and Zivagwe districts south west of Zimbabwe. The findings will be valuable to scholars who will carry out researches on social protection issues for women and children sturdily. The study will also form the basis in gender mainstreaming when designing social protection interventions by Government and international agencies in programming including Social Workers.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The researches have been conducted to evaluate the impact of Government-led social protection for the people at risk. The Government and Plan International, (2017) and Zimstats, (2017) for example discovered this much about the problem in Zimbabwe. Thus, rigorous debates, engaging discussions and in-depth research work and programming to support millions of families except that women and children continually face difficulties in accessing sufficient food for nutrition and physical well-being. The World Food Programme (WFP, 2018) and United States International Development Agency (USAID, 2020) added this to the knowledge gap. The concern in this review is that the interventions seem not to touch the aspects of social protection and nutrition amongst the women who are heads of households with children under their care. UNICEF, (2019) promulgates that nutrition in women and children must be seen as a cornerstone investment if the world is to achieve Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. The UN thrust of the SDGs is that Goal 1 "strives to end poverty in all its forms everywhere" and Goal 2 endeavours "to end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture". UNICEF, (2019b) proffers that "nutritional status of women and children constitutes pressing challenges for low-income countries with the lowest levels of MDG achievement and generalized chronic poverty and escalating child poverty rates". The State of the World's Children report demonstrate, far too many of our children and young people not getting the diets they need, which potentially

undermines their capacity to grow, develop and learn to their full potential (UNICEF, 2019). UNICEF added that women and children under the age of 5 years die due to natural disasters which substantially contribute to extreme food shortages. Many women and children who reside in remote areas live beneath the poverty lines which exemplify serious multifaceted state as a result of social protection barriers. Women and children are usually forced to forage for social protection programmes provided in the form of free food distribution, public works or food for work programmes, health and education assistance, child protection services and child supplementary feeding schemes. Chikova (2014) informs that Formal Social Protection Systems which are non-contributory means-tested have been put in place to address the needs of the children who live in absolute poverty line. Devereux (2016) advocates for a "comprehensive approach to social protection that will achieve sustainable food security, by combining interventions that constantly stabilise income or food production with those that raise income or food production, and are designed and delivered in ways that enhance social justice". This research proposes to go beyond WFP, Plan International and USAID's work and aims to adopt a comprehensive approach in evaluating the impact of Government-led interventions which past interventions have failed to highlight. This impact evaluation will develop a fresh trajectory into the existing body of knowledge and proffer new perspectives on best practices and policies on social protection for women and children. Research projects conducted in the past have mainly focused on people in general without specifically focusing on women and children. This review sought to understand the impact of Government-led social protection for women and children in the rural districts under study. The study provides solutions on how to intervene in programmes that address the problem of women and children and will further develop into best practices and policies.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

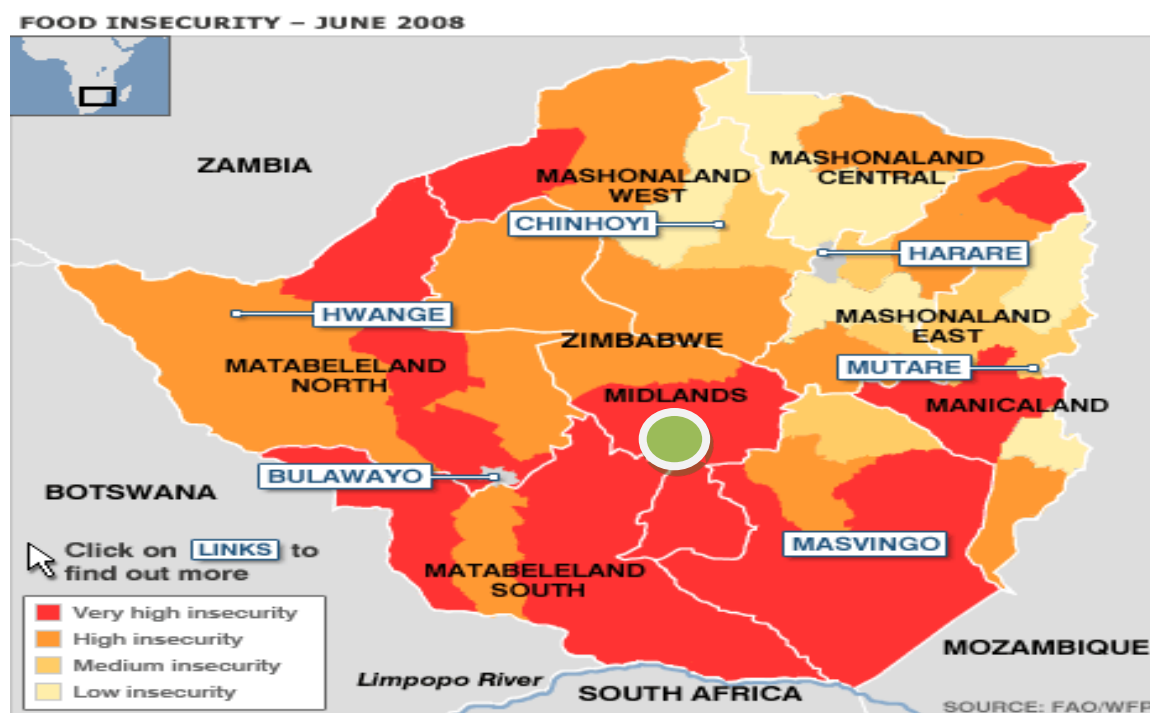
### *Data Collection methods*

The method used in this study was the survey method. Thus, questionnaire tool guides were designed and used to collect quantitative data. In-depth interview schedules were used to collect qualitative data through life history interviews, in-depth interviews, informal conversations, Focus Group Discussion (FGDs) and semi-participant observations. In-depth interviews were conducted with the study participants only willing to be researched on. The sampling design was based on geographical location, meaning that the study participants were representative of all the aged in the locality in the districts between March and August 2017.

### *Location of the Study*

The study was conducted in Chirumanzu and Zivagwe districts of the Midlands Province. The districts were selected because all seem to be prone to natural and manmade disasters. Scores of people, including women and children always fall under the emergency food aid programmes meant for remote rural communities. The two districts were also selected because of their proximity to the main roads which always transport food to and from the rural areas, making it a leading red food zone and yet these used to produce food on a commercial basis in some parts of the districts.

**Figure 1: Location of the Study by in the Midlands Province.**



Source: WFP, 2017

### **Study Population**

The study population comprised 60 women with ages 60+ years (30 per district) and 50 children from 6 to 15 years from ECD to Grade 7(30 per district). Ten key informants were chosen from Government departments, Churches and Community leaders. The totals were 120 respondents representing 26.7 percent of the total population of 450 sampled of the main study.

### **Data Analysis**

Data was analysed electronically and manually. The research objectives and questionnaire guides determined the analysis technique. Quantitative data was analysed electronically from particular to general using a computer software package known as the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS.pc). This was electronically coded and recorded the most repeatedly mentioned issues. Qualitative data was analysed using thematic content analysis. Data analysis focused on themes and sub themes set by the questionnaire tool guides.

### **Ethical Issues**

Permission was sought from the responsible authorities who granted authorization to access the respondents in their respective districts and wards. The respondents made decisions to participate in the study after adequate information was given that data after collection was for academic purposes. There was no coercion or any undue influence. Verbal and written consent were used for the protection of the subjects. Human rights and the potential risks and benefits were explained prior to the interview. The researcher guaranteed maximum confidentiality and anonymity through using numbers instead of names on the questionnaire tool guides. Uniformity of the information was assured by using the same questionnaires in the same format for all subjects. The collected information was safely accumulated to protect the participants.

## **RESULTS**

### **Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents**

This study evaluated the impact of social protection policies and programmes targeting women and children in the rural districts of Chirumanzu and Zivagwe; south west of Zimbabwe. The study selected 60 women as well as 50 Children for in-depth interviews and 10 key informants to represent. A good rapport conducive for a qualitative study was established. An interrogation on the impact of social protection for women and children across case study districts was instigated in order to determine possible interventions and strategies to improve the situation for women and children.

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Characteristics	Categories	Frequency (Percent)
<b>Sex</b>	Female	60 (13.3)
<b>Marital Status</b>	Widowed	40 (8.9)
	Divorced	15 (3.3)
	Never Married/Single	05 (1.1)
<b>Educational Status</b>	No formal education	06 (1.3)
	Primary education	25 (5.6)
	Secondary education	20 (4.4)
	Tertiary	09 (2.0)
<b>Occupation</b>	Vendor/Trader	10 (2.2)
	Household duties	20 (4.4)
	Subsistent farming	16 (3.6)
	Nutrition garden	14 (3.1)
<b>Key Informants</b>	Male and Female	10(2.22)
<b>Children</b>	Boys and Girls	30(6.7)

Source: Analysis from In-depth Interviews

### Public assistance

The study participants had varied views in conceptualizing Public Assistance (PA). The understanding was broad as many seemed to have adequate appreciative of the programme that unswervingly impacted on women and children “Public Assistance has been implemented over the past decades and most people now have the adequate knowledge about the programme” (male key informant, Chirumanzu district). The study discovered that women understand the programme which was implemented to mitigate people’s suffering and struggles in life situations. A number of women expressed that during periods of severe droughts and extreme food shortages, several women were still finding difficulties in accessing public assistance required to improve their nutrition and physical wellbeing. PA was well understood by many in the rural areas, except that in other situations, others expressed that they were not well informed and involved in planning and decision-making processes on programmes available for them. “I do not have the knowledge about any food security policies available for women and children. Most of the time we miss information unless one has a radio” (female respondent, Chirumanzu district). Even if several individuals distinguished those programmes, others highlighted that some were still excluded through means testing if they appeared to be well off than others in terms of family assets like livestock and houses. Living in remotest rural areas with rough terrains implies that distance prohibited some from benefiting from social protection programmes meant for the rural poor. “I am not receiving any assistance since I have a few houses which I constructed through personal life savings. Currently, I am surviving and coping with food shortages under inflexible economic and environmental hardships” (female study participant, Chirumanzu district). PA programmes are specifically targeted at both urban and communal areas. Some communal and resettlement sites were not accessible because of the location which is not within easy reach of walking distances on foot; especially for women and children. If places are not reached by certain designed outreach programmes, a number of women and children are bound to face difficulties in accessing social protection programmes. Poor women and children require reliable transport to reach district offices which are usually located in urban or major rural centres.

### Public works/food for work programme

Public Works or Food for Work is a common programme during severe droughts and extreme food shortages caused by incessant dry spells or flood disasters. So women expressed that life becomes very difficult if households have no access to social protection programmes. Thus, food for work programmes are designed to provide free food and cash assistance to the vulnerable people on condition that they participate in community

rehabilitation projects. The programme is self-targeting for which only the poor people are means tested for the programme. The objective is to quickly transfer food or incomes to the poorest households through temporary labour-intensive public works. The targeted poor usually include; women who are heads of households with children they care. These groups do not have enough capacity to advocate for themselves and the pain of frail and immobility may possibly go unnoticed also their voices can perhaps not be heard and attended to by those who conduct means testing. *"I harvested very little since I could not access agricultural inputs, fertilizer, seeds, and equipment on time and also those which were given through command agriculture specialized programme. I harvested less because I no longer have the energy to perform demanding activities since I am ageing. I pick wild fruits, begging, selling chickens (road runners), goats etc., if I have them"* (female study participant, Zivagwe district). The food for work programme was designed for every household except that the elderly, chronically ill and disabled persons and the able-bodied were not required to work on a community project. Such special groups are usually provided with free social protection assistance from Government and International food agencies in the form of food and cash transfers because due to drought, they were no longer able to support themselves. Social transfers encompass transfers to households or individuals, both in-kind and cash, including food for work programmes. The need for well-maintained public infrastructures akin to roads and dam reclamation and dip tank repairs became more apparent in all case study districts. Public works or food for work programmes was then initiated to avert the problem of food shortages amongst many families in the event of disasters. The vast majority of food-insecure families were those severely affected by drought and appeared to have limited and/or depleted food stocks and livelihoods resources to sustain until the next harvest.

The food for work programmes emerged as targeting families in general without first prioritizing the special needs of women and children who continually faced difficulties in accessing sufficient food for nutrition and physical wellbeing. The families means-tested were required to work on public works during droughts in return for food or cash on programmes improving community infrastructures. Community infrastructure developments included making contour ridges to catch water; livestock dip tank maintenance, surface run-offs in soil, small scale dam reclamation, construction of rural clinic or school construction. Traditional chiefs and the Environmental Management Agency (EMA) field staff jointly work tirelessly to discourage people from cutting down trees and burning of grazing areas for livestock which contribute to food shortages. *"Sometimes village we collect dried leaves (Murakwani) as an alternative to compost for conventional agriculture but if trees are cut to get dried leaves, there is a problem and EMA arrests those people who cause environmental degradation"* (female study participant Chirumanzu district). In order to protect the environment, people are assisted to gain new skills in preserving cultural heritage for their community through participation and then earn a wage of either cash or food. These are encouraged to employ conservation farming methods (planting trees and home-grown fruit trees) and opting for small grain crops. Local communities with assistance from some developmental agencies like CARITAS; a developmental arm of the Catholic Church helped them to construct small scale water catchments for nutrition gardens. Others engaged in diversified conservation agriculture (CA) where people chose to grow drought-resistant crops which could withstand harsh and dry spells and last longer. Farming systems ranged from conventional farming system using hand and hoe (*diga udye*) in Shona language to animal drawn power where they could grow varieties of crops to make up for the drought resistant crops. Households have been living abnormally and food for work programmes were launched to support the affected households, though a few like the elderly, the disabled and those chronically ill were exempted from working on any community or public works projects. In cases where an adult or an elderly person has an adult, the able bodied were expected to work on the programme on behalf of the less able bodied. Those without anyone to work for them certainly received free food assistance without questioning as their sources of livelihoods were not known and rarely well understood during difficult times.

### ***Child supplementary feeding programme***

Child Supplementary Feeding Programme (CSFP) was a social protection programme for the under-fives. Severe acute malnutrition seems to substantially contribute to high mortality rate of many children who usually die before the age of five. *Lack of important food stuffs like proteins, carbohydrates, fat, vitamins, minerals, etc result in malnutrition and diseases amongst women and children. Those who do not get enough food or supplementary feeding usually succumb to ill health and possible early deaths"* (female study participant, Zivagwe district). Those not killed by malnutrition are more likely to be affected by infectious diseases, which seriously affect their physical and cognitive development. The programme was introduced in some primary schools where children under the age of 5 years were allowed to access quantities of starch- and carbohydrate- based foods for cognitive development. Supplementary feeding scheme is essential amongst women and children and these social protection programmes have been introduced in all the districts to save the lives of the most vulnerable groups like women and children who are expected to benefit from these programmes.

### ***Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM)***

Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM) is a primary non-contributory means-tested social protections mechanism for primary school children. The results of this study show that the source of funding is from the Government with the assistance from international partners in programming who help in paying school fees for orphans and other vulnerable children. BEAM and SFPs were social protection programmes introduced in the rural areas for the children from very poor families as well as reducing the number of children dropping out of school including those who defaulted due to poverty. The respondents expressed that they assumed the responsibilities of child care because their parents had died or migrated leaving them with children who needed proper care. *"I assumed the responsibility of child care because all their parents died of HIV and AIDS and nobody was prepared to take care of them and to continue with their education"* (female study participant, Chirumanzu district). The Ministry of Labour and Social Services, in conjunction with the Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture, implemented the programme for all children identified to need school fees. The CSFPs seemed to work very well in those schools accessible and yet in those schools in remote areas, some respondents alleged that the children were marginalised. Chikova (2014) commended that one of the major problems facing the programme is low coverage of the population at risk and late disbursement of the funds to schools, resulting in children being sent away from school due to non-payment and poverty. The children should be supported by this programme since most of the women could not manage because the problem seemed difficult for them to administer.

### ***Free food distribution programme***

The Free Food Distribution Programme (FFDP) was becoming a common social protection agenda implemented in the rural districts following severe droughts and extreme food shortages. Free food aid was essential and Government and NGOs were found to be critical players in providing humanitarian assistance in the form of free food distribution to ensure that each household member consumed a minimum food basket representing FAO, (2006) at 2, 790 Kcal/person/day. *"We are receiving free food relief in the form of maize, beans, cooking oil, and cash transfers but the food aid is not enough to feed the whole family under my care. I want to express my gratitude to the Government and international food agencies who always remember during severe drought. Since I can no longer perform heavy duties due to ageing and immobility, I send my grandchildren to collect the food aid from the distribution enter. Sometimes I ask those with transport in the form of small vans, wheel barrows and scotch carts in exchange for food since I normally do not have the money to give them"* (female study participant Chirumanzu district). The agencies implement free food distribution programmes for the most vulnerable groups using local Government and traditional structures. Many families found themselves literally depending on humanitarian aid, queuing for handouts distributed through government drought relief programs. In all the districts, many women reported that they experienced a rise in the levels of vulnerability to food insecurity. women highly commended on the free food distribution and cash transfer social protection programmes introduced through means testing to cushion them during persistent droughts and floods disasters.

The impact of social protection was evidenced by the degree of social inclusion and exclusion through means testing. The programme was appreciated by many respondents who cited that vulnerable groups or individuals were likely to succumb to ill health and possible early death if the programme had not been initiated timely. Food production was overwhelmed by natural disasters and economic instability that is prevailing in the country. However, sometimes others reported were excluded from such programmes (even if the person qualified) when proved to possess a few family assets than others. Harmonised Social Cash Transfers (HSCTs) was introduced by in conjunction with the FFDP and the PWP. The scheme was means-tested and non-contributory whose main source of financing was donor funding. The programme involved direct cash transfers to household beneficiaries of the free food distribution or public works programme. Cash was transferred through mobile phones despite the fact that vast majority of women resided in remote areas where there was no network coverage and some women were reported to be illiterate or semi-illiterate. One participant said that it is essential to keep enough food reserved/stored in traditional granaries which could then be used in times of a bad harvest or when that which was put aside are depleted.

The scheme over relied on the residual model (Mupedziswa cited in Dhemba, 2013) which firmly holds that an individual's needs should be met by the family or market system and the state or agency should only assist when these systems breakdown. Whenever free food is brought to the community, participants expressed that everyone should benefit since each person is observably affected by disaster of any kind. There was urgent need to increase agricultural inputs, an increase in the local production of proper foods, targeted food aid and well-designed food distribution mechanisms that directly impact on the lives of women and children.

### ***Health assisted medical treatment order (AMTOS)***

Women and children are supposed to eat balanced diet for nutritional health and physical wellbeing and women seemed to lack important food stuffs like proteins, carbohydrates, vitamins, minerals, fat, etc which lack of this aforementioned result in malnutrition and diseases. Those giving humanitarian assistance should concentrate on body building food stuffs not to base on quantities which they were giving. One participant expressed that when she gets sick, she looks up to the Almighty God because He knows it all because even if she goes to the nearby clinic, there is shortage of medicines. The participant expressed that she cannot travel to the hospitals and cannot afford to pay the escalating medical bills.

The Health Assisted Medical Treatment Order (AMTOs) chips in for the health and physical wellbeing of these vulnerable people. The AMTO guarantees one to getting proper health care that reduces the risk of one failing to get treatment due to lack of money. The AMTO Scheme is means-tested and non-contributory programme financed by Government through the Ministry of Health and Child Welfare. The programme is designed for the poor; women and children as well as those who cannot not afford to pay medical bills. In interview, many women expressed that they were not aware of such programmes in the rural areas. These tended to benefit those in the rural areas and as a result, the vast majority faced difficulties in accessing rural health services due to financial resource constraints and lack of information on the scheme. *“We miss information unless one has a telephone or radio” (female study participant, Chirumanzu district.* Even though AMTOs are crucial for women and children, the results show that a number of economic and social barriers stood in their way. In order to address this problem, some respondents expressed that they needed to be put on pension scheme which should extent to the rural areas.

### ***Grain loan and operation Maguta/inala/food security schemes***

The Grain Loan Scheme (GLS) programme was launched by Government as one of the social protection programme that averts the problem of food shortages in the rural areas. The GLS was introduced to replace the food for work programmes implemented but then was re-introduced throughout the country. Government launched the Operation Maguta Food Security Command Agriculture) as government’s response to the continuing deterioration in national food security and malnutrition statuses of many people. The farmers in need are given agriculture inputs in the form of fertilizer and seeds which are supposed to be repaid back soon after a bumper harvest. The programme was open to everyone expected to repay back the loan after a bumper harvest. The scheme was based on the conviction that an improvement in logistics results in farmers getting agricultural inputs on time, plant early and get decent yields and the grain would be paid for in the form of cash or grain after the next harvest. The primary beneficiaries were drawn from those residing in Agro-regions characterized by low and erratic rainfall in low arid areas that normally result in crop failure. The GLS was designed to improve food security and nutrition for sufficient dietary food intake of families residing in rural areas. The scheme improved agricultural production, storage, higher consumption and interventions that increased the households’ nutrition. *“I did not join the scheme because I was not around when it was introduced, moreover I no longer have the energy to undertake heavy responsibilities as I am ageing” (female study participant Zivagwe district).* The study participants perceived themselves as lacking enough energy to perform heavy duties and gave reasons why they had not joined the programme. Likewise, others expressed that it was because in Agro-region IV and V communal areas were affected by drought despite bumper harvests in previous years. The participants appreciated agricultural inputs and equipment under GLS as was one of the primary social protection strategies to combat food insecurity amongst vulnerable families. Another pressing concern mentioned was that of insufficient human and financial capacity to repay back the loan after harvesting. The participants articulated that agriculture inputs were supposed to be given early for them to prepare before the onset of the rain season.” Sometimes resources to implement such programmes judiciously are hampered by inadequate resources.

## **DISCUSSION**

Reliability and dependability of the results were ensured by the careful selection of the respondents. The choice of the respondents was done with the assistance of research assistants as well as establishing good rapport with the respondents. The problem of severe droughts and extreme food shortages was understood as impacting negatively on nutrition and physical wellbeing of women and children. Thus, occurrences of the causes of food shortages, malnutrition and ill health were discussed in detail by the participants. In line with experience and common knowledge, women and children are potential victims in most food shortage incidents. The participants appeared to have mixed feelings with regards to the existing interventions and strategies used to address social protection problems amongst women and children.

The concern raised was also in relation the inclusion and exclusion criteria used during means testing. The respondents expressed with much anxiety that some deserving households were excluded in benefiting from the program if the family was proved to have some form of wealth or family assets. This apprehension was raised by



several respondents articulating that usually they were denied food assistance if means testing revealed they are well off than others even if they deserved. Many suggested that during droughts and food shortages, food distribution activities must be transparent and means testing should be revisited to include everyone.

FAO, (2012) and WFP, (2017) confirm that the vast majority of households face difficulties in accessing available food for nutrition and physical wellbeing driven as a result of inappropriate distribution strategies used in the rural areas. Zimstats, (2016) confirm that 51 percent of women reside in rural areas. The challenges are experienced amongst women and children who seem to be well catered for by their children and grandchildren who are employed. The results of this study found out that when there is severe drought, and extreme food shortages, everyone is affected and these obviously deserve social protection programmes that equally benefit everyone.

The food shortage problem exists and has direct impact on nutrition and health of women and children. Many women and children are provided with social protection programmes in the form of Public Assistance (PA), Food for Work/Public Works, Children Supplementary Feeding Scheme (CSFS), Basic Education Assistance (BEAM) programme and the Grain Loan Scheme (GLS), Command Agriculture (CA). A marked increase of households facing severe food shortages under socio-economic and environmental hardships. Kapungu, (2013) which confirm that many households have received food assistance from Government and international organizations operating in the district to promote food security to the vulnerable groups. These deserve social protection interventions that are anticipated to have a direct impact on women and children.

There are inevitable situations of severe droughts, malnutrition, escalating cost of living, environmental degradation in the rural areas. This situation shows that many women and children require social protection programmes with substantial impact on their lives especially when there are severe droughts and extreme food shortages. This study illustrates an element of environmental and socio-economic hardships which imply that underlying factors have a negative impact on the lives of women and children more than their male counterparts. These groups usually suffer in silent until Government and International food agencies alike intervene by designing and implementing social protection programmes. WFP, (2017) and UNICEF, (2019) agree that vulnerable women and children have little or no stock and have limited access to remittances; a situation which makes them more susceptible to food insecurity. Food shortages and malnutrition challenges have negative impacts on the health and physical wellbeing of women and children. The impact is very strong on women and children who tend to suffer in silent and what is more is that they deserve well designed social protection programmes.

The vast majority of the participants seemed to hold convinced observations that women with husbands are better off than those with no husbands as they have agricultural equipment they can use to produce, process and store food for the near future. The food resource was on the decline for those with husbands as well as those divorced widowed or single women with no husbands. Cultural, religious and legal instruments bar women from owning adequate land to work for themselves to sustain. Zimstats (2016), WFP, (2017) and UNICEF, (2019) confirm that women and children are negatively impacted by food shortage and malnutrition.

Women and children tended to suffer more than those in the ages 59 years and below. Such community views are counterfeited by the understanding that society sometimes hesitates to count on women and children on food production despite a different stance that women are still useful in society. The marked differences conceptualized food security and what constituted food shortages for women and children who expressed that they lacked adequate social protection. Mhlanga, (2018) perceives that programmes focus on children and at other times on women as a reproductive group.

## RECOMMENDATIONS/IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK

The role of social work takes place within the above organised social protection contexts which aim at helping individuals, families and communities; women and children in particular. Social workers are qualified people involved in administering and managing the welfare services of these vulnerable groups moreover play a fundamental role in social protection programming. Social workers act as mediators, mediators, planners and social policy interventions, facilitators with various groups at risks, reminiscent of women and children. Social workers have first-hand information and experiences in working at grassroots level and can contribute magnificently in the formation and advocating for comprehensive social protection in community action as well as social research. Social workers can utilise the collected data in social research to enhance planning for sufficient resources and sustainable development and can become efficient in designing mitigation and adaptation strategies targeting women and children. Social worker play an active role in gender mainstreaming in favour of empowering women and children. The gender inequality and discrimination impact negatively on anticipated social protection programmes of women and children mostly. In the past, gender and equity policy interventions have been weak and lagging behind when it comes to decision making and allocation of social protection resources amongst women and children. The rural areas require ample knowledge on contemporary gender issues

in favour of women and children as well as their access to social protection programming. Thus, women in south west of Zimbabwe were present in scheme management except had they had limited space in decision making processes (Tagutanazvo and Dzingirayi, 2018). Rural women are expected to participate in economic, agricultural livelihoods for survival and coping with socio-economic challenges. There is urgent need for mitigation and adaptation strategies on social protection of women and children by all-stakeholder in an endeavours to address the problem. The study is calling on Government and international agencies in programming and social work practitioners to intervene through advocating and re-enforcing clear policies in programming that have direct impact on women and children in Zimbabwe.

## CONCLUSION

This study evaluated the impact of social protection amongst women and children in Zimbabwe. Severe droughts and extreme food shortages impact negatively on the lives of women and children in particular. The social protection programmes are usually put in place to enhance food security and wellbeing of many people in general without targeting women and children in particular. Cash Transfers, Child Supplementary Feeding Scheme, Public Assistance, free food distribution, public works or food for work and the Grain Loan Scheme were some of the social protection programmes implemented by Government and international food agencies in the rural areas. In spite of these splendid efforts, women and children still faced difficulties in accessing sufficient food for nutrition and physical wellbeing because their needs are superior to those of their counterparts. Social policy interventions are meaningful and successful if only all stakeholders could put their efforts together in delivering fitting social protection programmes for women and children timely, thus impacting positively on their lives. The study hints that women and children could be imparted with social protection mitigation and adaptation strategies to enhance their health and physical wellbeing.

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