

# “That Woman is a ‘Farmer’”: Gender and the Changing Character of Commercial Agriculture in Zimbabwe

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## Abstract

Female participation in commercial agriculture as part of women’s work in Zimbabwe remains inadequately documented and theorised. In a context of land reform and framed within the Transformative Social Policy framework, this paper seeks to highlight commercial agriculture as a new work role for women that challenges the existing gender system characterising commercial agriculture as a male-dominated occupation. Primary data gathered through ethnographic fieldwork, which formed part of the author’s doctoral research, reveals that the post-2000 land reform programme in Zimbabwe created a cohort of women commercial farmers, 12% are A2 farm owners according to government statistics. Within the study site, Mkwasine sugarcane farming area, 24.4% of the redistributed commercial sugarcane plots were allocated to women, justifying the exploration of women farmers in commercial agriculture, a research niche yet to be adequately documented in the Zimbabwe land reform literature. Women commercial sugarcane farmers are defying the gender system to claim the “farmer” title, once a preserve for men. This is despite household work remaining a female responsibility making “being a farmer, a housewife and a mother just too much work for women.”

**Keywords:** women, commercial agriculture, Zimbabwe, reproductive labour, productive labour

## Introduction

Literature is awash with statistics suggesting that African women make up almost 50% of the agricultural labour force in sub-Saharan Africa and produce 80% of the continent's food (AfDB, 2015: 9). The narrative proceeds to highlight that the majority of African women work mainly in smallholder production, portraying African farming to be at production levels sufficient only for own consumption subsistence agriculture (Fonjong and Gyapong, 2021: 4). This reinforces the common assumption that subsistence farmers are female while commercial farmers are male (Amenyah and Puplampu, 2013: 15). Agriculture is argued to come second after consumer goods as the largest industrial sector by value in Africa, and the McKinsey Global Institute projects that the sector will expand at a rate of 6% per annum until 2030 (AfDB, 2015: 8). In spite of occupying such a position within the African economy, little is known about the participation of African women within the sector as commercial farmers in their own right and the potential impact of this new type of work on women.

Zimbabwe has a long history of the establishment of some form of “indigenised” commercial agriculture dating back to the Land Apportionment Act of 1930 (Cheater, 1981: 369; Gaidzanwa, 2011: 4; Scoones, Mavedzenge and Murimbarimba, 2018: 598). The Act set aside 3,7 million acres to create what were then called Native Purchase Areas (NPAs), lands set aside as a concession to indigenous black Africans for the loss of their rights (Cheater, 1981: 374). Within these designated areas, which subsequently changed name post-independence to Small-Scale Commercial Farms (SSCFs) thus distinguishing them from the former white Large-Scale Commercial Farms (LSCFs), indigenous black Africans with the requisite resources were allowed to buy freehold lands to set up commercial farms owned and managed by black Africans (Cheater, 1981: 374; Scoones *et al.*, 2018: 598). Colonial land allocation laws in the NPAs discriminated against indigenous black African women as they specified only married black African men as holders of farming rights (Cheater, 1986: 71; Gaidzanwa, 2011: 4). With women legally not allowed to own property in their own right, including freehold land before independence and a few years thereafter, commercial production on small and large-scale commercial farming areas remained a preserve of black African and white European men, respectively.

On the eve of the land reform programme in 2000 following the 1990s policy shift geared towards deracialising LSCFs, only 11% of freehold land under commercial agricultural production was owned by indigenous black Africans (Moyo and Skalnes, 1990: 158; Palmer, 1990: 174). Very little is known about how much of the 11% freehold commercial agricultural land was owned by indigenous black African women, as indications suggest that women benefitted less as “efficiency” and “experience” took centre stage (Tekwa, 2020: 18). Highlighting the racial and gendered nature of commercial agriculture in Zimbabwe, the Rukuni Commission of 1994 indicates that only 2.3% of LSCFs in Zimbabwe were female-owned (Rukuni Commission, 1994). This article focuses on the post-2000 land reform programme in which anecdotal government policy indicates that 30% of the land that was to be redistributed was set aside for women resulting in 12% of the redistributed A2 farms<sup>1</sup> – capitalist commercial oriented medium-scale farms – being allocated to women (Utete, 2003; Chiweshe *et. al.*, 2014: 6).

The article adopts a strict definition of commercial agriculture to mean the primary production of crops and livestock mainly for commercial purposes; thus, a commercial farmer is one who sells all they produce (Grant *et. al.*, 2017: 5) and, in this context, on free or leasehold land. The paper adopts this definition to exclude all forms of commercialisation of peasant farming including the sale of surplus or the production of cash crops by the latter on communally-held land. Africanised commercial forms of agriculture remain inadequately theorised generally. This is more acute from a gender perspective. This paper seeks to redress that imbalance in the literature. It focuses on women commercial farmers on State-facilitated leasehold land reform A2 farms in Zimbabwe and seeks to highlight the transformative new work role for indigenous black African women entering the male-dominated farming occupation to claim the “farmer” title, thus challenging the existing gender systems (Haugen and Brandth, 1994: 206). This study represents an important but neglected area of research in Africa, that is, indigenous black African women in commercial agriculture, a research niche that has been eclipsed by the predominant feminisation of agriculture thesis

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1 A2 farms are medium commercial production-oriented farms above 20 hectares. The smaller A1 farms are family farms between five and ten hectares of arable land taking on the subsistence model of the communal areas.

and the greater participation of African women in peasant and subsistence forms of agriculture. Based on primary research, the paper seeks to highlight that African women in agriculture represent a more diverse group including women as independent commercial farmers, a new work role for indigenous black African women made possible within the context of land reform. However, I argue that these women are not fully supported in their competing roles as wives and mothers (Bhatasara, 2011: 316; Amenyah and Pupilampu, 2013: 26) thus limiting the transformative nature of the social policy of land redistribution.

## **Methods and Materials**

Data for the article comes from sugarcane farmers in Mkwazine Chiredzi district, Zimbabwe, comprising 12 male-headed households and 20 female-headed households making a total sample of 32 randomly selected households. Data was gathered using a mixed methods approach comprising surveys, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and field observations. Quantitative data was statistically analysed with the aid of the SPSS software package. Given the rather small size of the sample, the statistical test used in this analysis is the Fisher test. As argued by quantitative specialists such as Kim (2017: 154) the Fisher test is the most appropriate test for determining statistically significant differences among a small sample. Atlas Ti was used to conduct a thematic analysis of the qualitative data in this study.

## **Literature Review**

A large body of literature exists on gender and land (tenure) reform in Africa, although with a particular focus on African customary lands and more lately on the gender implications of large-scale land acquisitions on the continent (Amanor, 2012; Amenyah and Pupilampu, 2013: 16; Tsikata, 2016; Fonjong and Gyapong, 2021). Scholars such as Tsikata (2016) use a feminist agrarian political economy perspective and write from the context of West Africa, where colonialism established smallholder models of production, to highlight the extent to which social relations of production within African traditional smallholder agriculture are rooted in structurally unequal power relations in which men as a group sought to control female labour, thus reproducing gender inequalities and poverty (Amanor-Wilks, 2009: 32; Tsikata and Amanor-Wilks, 2009: 3). These

scholars stress the extent to which the conjugal contract of marriage lies at the heart of household production relations with differentiated gendered livelihoods outcomes (Tsikata and Amanor-Wilks, 2009: 3). Using a livelihoods approach, Tsikata (2016) explores the gender implications of State efforts towards improving land tenure security for smallholder farmers, which are embedded within a gendered division of labour and male control of productive resources. Writing from the same context, but with a focus on large-scale land acquisitions, Fonjong and Gyapong (2021) used an agrarian political economy perspective to highlight the gendered negative implications of large-scale investments in plantation agriculture on household food security in Ghana and Cameroon. The authors highlight the extent to which customary lands are being deeply integrated into capitalist markets thereby exacerbating existing inequalities, while at the same time generating new forms of control to the detriment of women's welfare.

While not comparable with respect to theoretical rigour, many studies on gender and land reform have been conducted following land reform in Zimbabwe. This literature focuses on the laws governing access, ownership and control over land in Zimbabwe and their biases against women (Bhatasara, 2011: 316; Shumba, 2011: 241). Issues regarding equitable access to land between women and men, land titling and registration, as well as joint titling for couples, have tended to receive greater limelight (Matondi, 2012:185; Chiweshe *et al.*, 2014: 6). Highlighting the "indifference of hegemonic masculinities", Bhatasara used Amartya Sen's capability and human rights-based approach to argue that State involvement in land allocation, registration as well as titling negatively affects access to land for women in relation to men, resulting in the creation of new rights through the State for men, not women (Bhatasara, 2011: 316). The author argues that land reform without decisive policymaking does not automatically bring about gender-equitable outcomes, while at the same time highlighting the gender blindness of androcentric state policies which assume that giving land to households automatically benefits women (Bhatasara, 2011: 317). Acknowledging the above shortcomings of the latest land reform programme in Zimbabwe, some gender scholars focus on women's entrepreneurial activities following access to land in Goromonzi and Mwenezi districts (Mazhawidza *et al.*, 2011; Mutopo, 2011). These studies focused more on women on smaller A1 farms and less on the commercially-oriented A2 farms. In the Zimbabwean

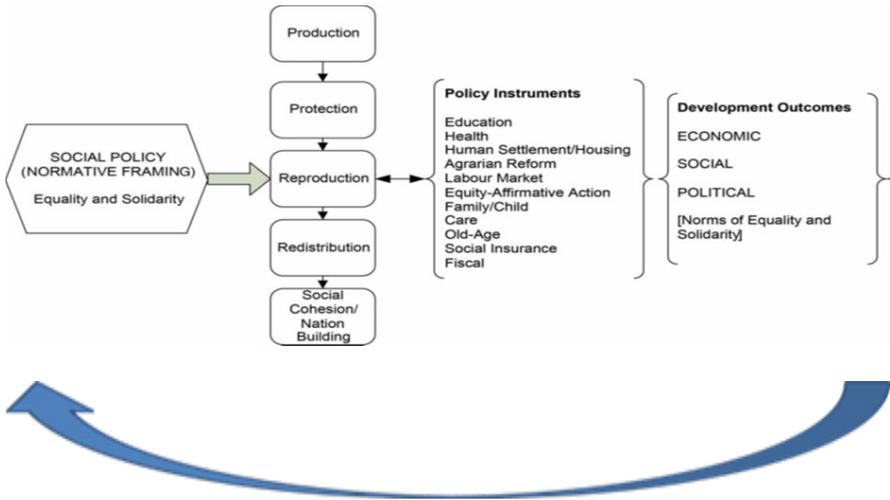
literature on gender and land reform, not much is known about the experiences of women who got A2 farms irrespective of their minute numbers (Tekwa, 2020: 47).

This is in spite of the existence of a growing body of scholarly work focusing on the growth of medium-scale commercial farms across the African continent (Sitko and Jayne, 2014; Sitko and Chamberlin, 2015; Anseeuw *et al.*, 2016; Scoones *et al.*, 2018). These studies highlight the fact that medium-scale commercial farms are quite distinct from the traditional forms of subsistence farming on farm sizes ranging from an average of 5ha to 50ha, thus occupying an intermediate position between the small-scale subsistence farms and the large-scale and more commercial farms (Sitko and Chamberlin, 2015: 870; Anseeuw *et al.*, 2016: 2). While in other parts of the continent, this is an important development endogenously driven by wage earners' investment in customary lands, the Zimbabwean case remains distinct as it was a State-driven social policy intervention with clearly set out policy objectives targeting not customary but white-owned freehold large-scale farms established during the colonial period (Scoones *et al.*, 2018; see also Tom and Banda in this issue). A limitation of this literature is that it is yet to incorporate a gender lens to understand the extent to which indigenous African women are participating in either the wage-driven acquisitions of African customary lands or the State-sponsored acquisitions of freehold large-scale farms. This research seeks to redress that imbalance by documenting the experiences of A2 women commercial sugarcane farmers on leasehold land in the Chiredzi district located in the southeast of Zimbabwe. In doing so, this article seeks to interrogate the extent to which the State's attempt to assist its citizens in the acquisition of land was a truly transformative social policy.

## **Conceptual Framework: Transformative Social Policy and the Role of The State**

Within the context of land reform, therefore, I sought to deploy the Transformative Social Policy (TSP) framework (see Figure 1) to highlight the critical role of the State in facilitating equality of opportunities for women and men in progressive commercial-oriented agriculture.

Figure 1: TSP framework, norms, instruments and functions



Source: Adesina (2011: 463).

The TSP approach has its origins in the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) flagship programme, *Social Policy in Development Context*, which sought to highlight the multi-tasks and developmental role of social policy (Mkandawire, 2004; UNRISD, 2010). Underpinned by norms of equality and solidarity, social policies within the TSP framework, as indicated in Figure 1, are context-dependent and can be tasked with multiple social policy functions/objectives of production, protection, reproduction, redistribution, and social cohesion/nation-building. While production leads to protection and so forth, as presented in the diagram, these social policy functions are not mutually exclusive. For instance, public funding of education through taxes is redistributive but with productive social protection, social cohesion/nation-building social policy outcomes. Similarly, public investment in child and elderly care, while redistributive, has productive as well as progressive social reproduction outcomes on the gender front. Figure 1 presents the diversity of social policy instruments available to policymakers in the attainment of these multiple social policy objectives ranging from education, health, housing, labour market, care

and old age, social insurance, fiscal (including land and agrarian) reform policies for progressive economic, social, and political outcomes. These outcomes feed back to the framing resulting in reformulation and new weighting of the social functions over time. Germane to this study, the TSP highlights the importance of social reproduction to advance equality on the gender front in addition to the elevation of the State as opposed to the market in social provisioning and its facilitation role in creating social transformation.

As illustrated in Figure 1, land and agrarian reform constitute one important social policy instrument within the TSP framework as the redistribution of land remains a major factor in commercial agricultural production and a necessary and prerequisite condition for becoming a “farmer” (Haugen and Brandth, 1994: 211; Brandth, 2002: 183). With traditional men’s identity as “farmers” closely linked to male ownership of land, within the TSP framework, access to land for women through State-facilitated land redistribution programmes is critical for the future of African women’s work as farmers in a changing agrarian world. I explore the extent to which this has truly been realised in the Zimbabwean case.

## **Redistribution and the Creation of A Cohort of Women Commercial Farmers in Zimbabwe**

One of the outcomes of the post-2000 land reform programme in Zimbabwe relates to the redistribution of land across different sections of Zimbabwean society. Moyo (2009:1) indicates that about 80% of the former LSCFs acquired for redistribution benefited a broad range of beneficiaries, including women, compared to previous land reform programmes. While national statistics indicate that 12% of the redistributed agricultural land within the A2 model (geared towards commercial agriculture) was allocated to women, Table 1 highlights the distributional outcomes of the post-2000 land reform programme within the country’s eight rural provinces. The Matabeleland provinces record the highest numbers of female A2 land reform beneficiaries with Matabeleland South topping the list at 21% followed by Matabeleland North at 17% of A2 beneficiaries being women.

**Table 1: Percentage of A2 (Medium Size) Commercial Farms Allocated to Women Across Zimbabwe's Eight Rural Provinces**

Province	Outcome %			Province	Outcome %		
	Women	Men	Total		Women	Men	Total
Midlands	5.0	95.0	100.0	Matabeleland South	17.0	83.0	100.0
Mashonaland Central	13.0	87.0	100.0	Manicaland	9.0	91.0	100.0
Mashonaland West	11.0	89.0	100.0	Mashonaland East	-	-	- (missing data)
Matabeleland North	21.0	79.0	100.00	Masvingo	8.0	92.0	100.0
National Average					12.0	88.0	100.0

*Source: Government of Zimbabwe, 2003*

While figures are missing for Mashonaland East province, the proportion of women beneficiaries within the Mashonaland provinces ranges around the national average with 11% and 13% of the redistributed commercial-oriented A2 farms, in Mashonaland West and Mashonaland Central province respectively, allocated to women land beneficiaries. Based on the proportion of women A2 beneficiaries, the Midlands and Masvingo provinces reflected the most patriarchal tendencies during the land redistribution programme with the former recording the lowest proportion of women A2 beneficiaries at 5% while Masvingo province, where the district of study, Chiredzi, is located, recorded 8% A2 women land reform beneficiaries (see also Tom and Banda in this issue). Although men benefitted more than women across the eight rural provinces, the proportion of women benefiting within the A2 commercial-oriented agricultural production justifies the exploration of women's experiences as commercial farmers, a new work role for Zimbabwean women farmers.

Pre-2000, sugarcane production in Zimbabwe was spread across three estates, namely Mkwasine, Hippo Valley and Triangle Estates. While only the out-grower section of the Hippo Valley and the Triangle Estates of Chiredzi were acquired for redistribution, Mkwasine Estate, where this research was conducted, was wholly acquired by the government to form the largest block of A2 sugarcane plots subsequently redistributed to 431 indigenous land reform beneficiaries as presented in Table 2.

**Table 2: Distribution of A2 (Medium Size) Commercial Sugarcane Farms at Mkwesine Vhiredzi District, Masvingo Province**

Redistribution Section	Allocated Ha	Sugarcane Farms Distributed by Gender at Mkwesine, Chiredzi District				
		No. Male	%	No. Female	%	Total No. of Farms
Former White Settler Growers	1350	146	76.4	45	23.6	191
Former Mkwesine Estate	4880	180	75.0	60	25.0	240
<b>Total</b>	<b>6230</b>	<b>326</b>	<b>75.6</b>	<b>105</b>	<b>24.4</b>	<b>431</b>

*Source:* Fieldwork, 2016

The former Mkwesine Estate comprised a settler out-grower section covering 1,350ha and a main estate covering 4,880ha to make a total of 6,230ha. This total was subdivided into plot sizes averaging 20ha each as shown in Table 2. It is important to note the relatively high percentage of women A2 beneficiaries in Mkwesine; at 24.4%, this stood at twice the national average. This was a remarkable departure from colonial and early post-independence allocation of resettlement land. Close to a quarter of the redistricted sugarcane plots in Mkwesine were allocated to women beneficiaries to form an unprecedentedly large cohort of female commercial sugarcane producers in the south-eastern part of Zimbabwe. This has created a less publicised new work role for black Zimbabwean women distinct from the labour exploitative “women as ‘farm hands’” characteristic of the agricultural commercialisation thesis in Africa (Hajjar, 2017: 15).

The role of the State in facilitating such a transformation cannot be over-emphasised. Sugarcane production in the south-eastern corner of Zimbabwe is highly industrialised and commodity-focused. Much of the sugarcane produced in Chiredzi is oriented toward the external market with a small proportion consumed within the domestic market. In the absence of the State, women would have been precluded entry into this high-value global production chain (Haugen and Brandth, 1994: 9; Brandth, 2002: 188; Shisler and Sbicca, 2019: 3).

The expansion of an indigenous out-grower area linked to a commercial large-scale sugar estate, Tongaat Hulett Zimbabwe (THZ)<sup>2</sup>, represents one of the redistributive outcomes of the post-2000 land redistribution programme in Zimbabwe (Scoones *et al.*, 2016: 1). According to the company's website, the post-2000 land reform programme in Zimbabwe made a net "transfer of nearly 16,000ha to over 800 resettlement farmers on irrigated 'A2' plots of around 20ha each" (<http://www.tongaath.co.za>). Access to these lands did not require much beyond an application and was as accessible to widowed women as it was to married women. As one interviewee explained:

During the land reform programme, I went and applied for land at the Agritex department just as others were doing. I was just trying as women are always looked down upon. After three months, I received a call from Masvingo notifying me that there is an offer letter in my name. I went there and was told that I was offered land at Mkwesine Estate. This is how I got this piece of land. My husband died in 1994, well before the land reform programme. The land is 17,3ha.

(In-depth Interview Female A2 Land Beneficiary 03 September 2016)

Similarly, another opined:

I am the one who looked for the land even though my husband was still alive. I applied and got an opportunity and got the 20ha land in my name even though my husband is still alive.

(In-depth Interview Female A2 Land Beneficiary 14 September 2016)

Clearly, land allocations in the post-2000 land redistribution programme in Zimbabwe represent a marked departure from colonial and early post-independence land allocation procedures that tended to disadvantage women. While women's access to land in the post-2000 land allocation programme was much easier than in previous times, the true measure of the revolutionary nature of this programme lay in the ability of the women to cultivate these plots and earn income from it, which is the subject of the next section.

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<sup>2</sup> Tongaat Huletts is a large South African-owned sugar conglomerate, which controls the largest percentage of shares in the Zimbabwean sugar industry. Its business in Zimbabwe alone is worth several millions of dollars.

## **Sugarcane Production Trends and Women Farmers' Contribution to Total Production**

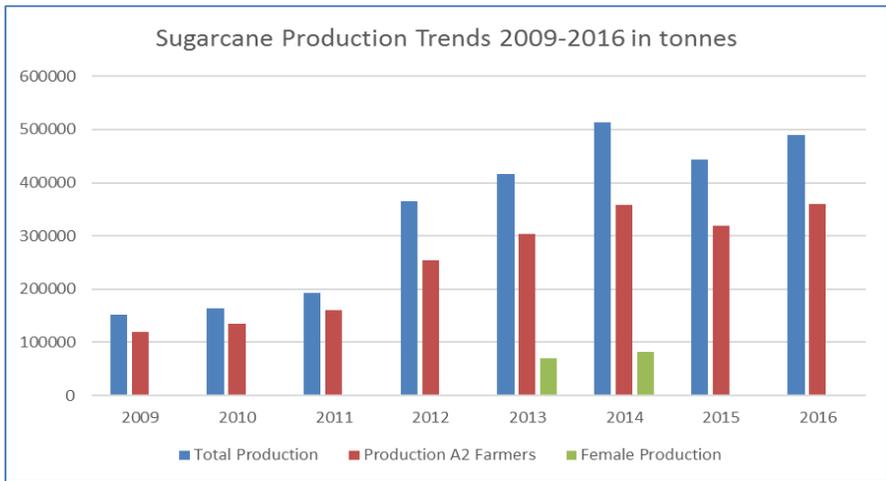
While sugarcane production declined in the aftermath of the land reform programme, as shown in Figure 2, sugarcane production doubled between 2011 and 2014 because of the Successful Rural Sugarcane Farming Community Project (SUSCO) intervention. SUSCO was a partnership between the Zimbabwean government, private funding institutions represented by Bank ABC, Tongaat Hulett, a private firm, the EU, and rural communities. This comprehensive private farmer rehabilitation programme had the goal of supporting private (resettled) farmers to increase their supply of sugarcane to the mills. The programme involved a four-year revolving US\$20 million financing scheme. It benefitted some 872 sugarcane farmers from the Hippo Valley, Triangle and Mkwesine Milling Group areas.

In the 2014/15 season, however, there was a slight decline in the levels of production. This is attributed to the drought, which affected the sub-region, and led to the rationing of water for irrigation. Despite the drought, farmers managed to record an overall 10.68% increase in sugarcane production in the 2015/16 season. Women farmers held their own in this production effort. A brief background of these women sugarcane farmers helps to illuminate the transformative potential of social policy approaches in addressing structural gender inequalities. While the political affiliation of these women was not a subject of interest to the researcher, the average age of this cohort of 20 women commercial sugarcane farmers in 2016 was 48,18 years. 70% of them indicated that they originated from communal areas within the Chiredzi district, their province of Masvingo or other communal areas within Zimbabwe. 75% indicated that they were not previously employed. The remaining 25% indicated that they were in formal employment. With regards to education, 30% had primary education as their highest educational attainment with 45% having attained secondary education. The remaining 25% representing the category in formal employment had tertiary education. 25% reported that they were married while the remaining 25% were widowed.

Against this background, in the 2013 and 2014 production seasons, for example, these women sugarcane farmers made a 23.0% and 22.74% contribution

respectively to the total output on the Mkwesine A2 farms. This indicates that female land beneficiaries made an equal contribution to total production as their male counterparts since they constitute 24.4% of the land beneficiaries in Mkwesine.

**Figure 2. Sugarcane Production Trends (Mkwesine Area 2009-2016)**



**Source:** Fieldwork, 2016

Through the State-facilitated land reform programme, women sugarcane commercial farmers are making an equal productive contribution to the national sugarcane output as their male counterparts. In Chiredzi, sugarcane production constitutes a new work role for Zimbabwean women in the south-eastern part of the country. The “plugging” onto globally integrated high-value commodity chains of the new out-growers has had robust work and employment outcomes not mentioned in much of the analyses of the latest land reform programme in Zimbabwe. With “excellent topography, climate and established water storage and conveyance infrastructures for irrigation,” Scoones *et al.* (2016:2) argued that the resettled sugarcane farmers now account for 25% of the sugar production supplied to Triangle and Hippo Valley mills. The business remains optimistic as “sugar production in Zimbabwe in the 2012/2013 financial year increased by 28% to 475,000 tons, as sugarcane deliveries from private and third-party farmers grew substantially.” (<http://www.tonga.co.za>).

## Gender, Farm Sizes and Incomes in Zimbabwe

Research in other parts of the world, such as the US, has found that women-run farms are relatively smaller in size compared to those run by their male counterparts (USDA 2012 cited in Shisler and Sbicca, 2019: 2). This, however, is not the case with farm sizes for male and female farmers in post-2000 in Zimbabwe. While the average farm size for the 32 households surveyed in Mkwesine was 21.32ha (see Table 3), the chi-square p-value testing the relationship between gender and farm size produced a null hypothesis indicating gender as an unimportant factor in the distribution of farm sizes. In female-headed households, 45% of the land reform beneficiaries have sugarcane plot sizes averaging between 16ha and 20ha. The percentage for male-headed households is pegged at 41.6%. Similarly, there are almost twice as many women with farm sizes between 21ha and 25ha as there are men.

**Table 3: Gender and Farm Sizes in Mkwesine, Chiredzi**

Farm Sizes (Ha)	Farm Size Distribution by Gender					
	Male		Female		Total	
	No	%	No	%	No	%
11-15 Ha	2	16.7	1	5.0	3	9.4
16-20 Ha	5	41.6	9	45.0	14	43.8
21-25 Ha	2	16.7	6	30.0	8	25.0
Above 25 Ha	3	25.0	4	20.0	7	21.9
Total	12	100	20	100	32	100
Mean Land Size Ha						21.32
Chi-Square P-Value						1.727

*Source:* Fieldwork, 2016

The farm size distribution presented in Table 3 clearly defies the gender disparities in farm sizes prevalent in the existing literature. As with farm sizes, there are no significant gender differences in farm incomes of male and female farmers. Fisher’s Exact Test of Significance testing the relationship between the gender of household heads and farm incomes indicated a null hypothesis defying gender disparity in farm incomes. While the average per capita income was pegged at US\$4 462.03, per capita household income for female-headed households was found to be higher at US\$4 859.56 relative to US\$4 038.00 for male-headed households (see Table 4).

**Table 4: Gender and Farm Incomes in Mkwazine, Chiredzi**

Per Capita Household Income US\$	Household per Capita Mean		Household per Capita Max.		Household per Capita Min.	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Household per Capita Mean	4,038.00	4,859.56	11,600.00	11,000.00	1538.00	1714.00
<b>Household per Capita Income by Area</b>						
Study Site Per Capita Mean	4,462.03					
Fisher’s Exact Test of Significance	.269					

*Source:* Fieldwork, 2016

If income generation is a major source of male status and identity (Brandth, 2002: 184;), so it is for Zimbabwean women farmers engaged in commercial agricultural production. Their access to land, participation in industrial forms of agricultural production, and enhanced household incomes represent a source of status and identity for women commercial sugarcane farmers in Zimbabwe. The voices of the women interviewed are indicative of the pride in their new-found identity:

Now, as I move around, people will be saying “*Mai avo murimi*.” (“That woman is a sugarcane farmer.”) I feel equal to men just because we all have land. When speaking, we speak the same language on farming and on equal footing. Even on household welfare, if we all depend on the land for welfare, I feel equal or even surpassing some men. Women used to wait outside the bank to be given some money by their husbands. Now we are all entering banking halls asking whether revenues are reflecting on bank statements with all status and confidence.

(In-depth Interview Female A2 Sugarcane Farmer 14 September 2016).

Access to land has transformed my social status. I cannot compare myself with my working colleagues here without any land. There is a difference. I can afford to send my child to an expensive university or boarding school or out of the country because I have access to land. My work colleagues cannot afford even to send one child to boarding school, yet I can afford to have three children in boarding school at a given time, something I could not have afforded based on my salary as a nurse.

(In-depth Interview Female A2 Sugarcane Farmer 15 September 2016).

## **Farm Work as a Business**

Given how much money the women farmers make as sugarcane farmers, it is not surprising that they treat their farm work as a conscious occupational choice and seek to enhance their knowledge in the field. These women seek farmer support services from extension workers in equal numbers as their male counterparts do (see Table 5).

**Table 5: Women Commercial Sugarcane Farmers and Access to Specialised Crop Training and Support Services**

Farmer Support Services	Mkwesine A2 Farms						
	Male		Female		Total		
	No	%	No	%	No	%	
Field Crop Market	Yes	12	100	20	100	32	100.0
	No	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Extension Services	Public	12	100	20	100	32	100.0
	Private	12	100	20	100	32	100.0
Inputs on Credit	Yes	7	58.3	14	70.0	21	65.6
	No	5	41.7	6	30.0	11	34.4
Bank Loans	Yes	8	66.7	9	45.0	17	53.1
	No	4	33.3	11	55.0	15	46.9

*Source: Fieldwork, 2016*

Sugarcane farmers have access to both publicly- and privately-provided extension and technical agricultural services. The key informant interview with the estate field extension officer highlighted the highly significant work the estate is doing to provide training and extension services critical to building the capacity of resettled sugarcane farmers, including women commercial farmers.

The estate is assisting farmers with extension advice from land preparation to harvesting. We conduct field training, workshops and seminars educating farmers on the production of cane. Recently, since it's harvesting time, we trained the farmers on putting sugarcane on dry-off in preparation for harvesting, the importance of drying-off cane, when to do dry-off and how long depending on soil types; proper cane cutting, the level of cutting; arranging cane in a bundle for easy haulage and the standard size of a cane bundle. A sugarcane farmer must know all these. So, we schedule our training according to these stages. After this, we get into training on fertiliser application and so on.

(Key Informant Interview, Field Extension Officer, 24 September 2016).

In addition, due to their relatively poor economic background and status as formerly unemployed individuals, these women farmers are more likely to seek commercial agricultural support services, including inputs on credit, than their male counterparts, although access to bank loans is lower for women farmers. This is not surprising, given the large body of work that shows gendered access to formal credit facilities (Agarwal, 1994, 2003).

In the Mkwazine sugarcane areas of Chiredzi, women commercial farmers are also affirming their new work roles as farmers in their own right by joining and taking up leadership roles in the Farmers' Unions in the sugarcane industry. One interviewee shared with us as follows:

I am a member of the Commercial Sugarcane Farmers Association of Zimbabwe (CSFAZ). There are three women in the executive and eight men. The treasurer is a female, and the other two are committee members. (In-depth Interview Female A2 Sugarcane Farmer 03 September 2016).

Another opined:

I am an executive member of the Mkwazine Sugarcane Farmers Association (MSFA). I am a committee member in the executive committee comprising four males and two females.

(Key Informant Interview Female A2 Sugarcane Farmer 28 September 2016).

## **Farm Decision-Making and Transformation from Farm Labourers to Employers**

Not only are female land beneficiaries co-identified as farmers together with male land beneficiaries, but also as employers in their own right, hiring both casual labour during peak labour demand periods such as harvesting, and a lean permanent labour force during off-peak seasons. As shown in Table 6, permanently hired workers on A2 sugarcane farms were pegged at 3.69 workers. This is in addition to work opportunities created for household members, creating cumulative total employment or work opportunities at 6.27 workers. As indicated in Table 6, female sugarcane farmers are not only employing female but also male workers, thus transforming gendered labour relations on sugarcane farms. An

average of 3.0 work opportunities were created for male workers relative to female workers pegged at 0.72. This contrasts with the narrative that females represent the largest percentages of farm labourers (Chambati, 2017: 84). Although the women workers are fewer, they sometimes held high positions in the field as we found out through the in-depth interviews:

I have five permanent employees, four of whom are male and a woman supervisor. She is the supervisor, and male workers take orders from her...  
Wherever she makes a mistake I will see to it.

(In-depth Interview Widowed A2 Female Land Beneficiary 14 September 2016)

**Table 6: Sugarcane Farm Employment in Mkwasiine Chiredzi**

	Average Number of Hired Workers	Number of Male Workers	Number of Female Workers	Average Number of Household Members Working on the Farm	Total Farm Labour Force
Mkwasiine Estate	3.69	3.0	0.72	2.58	6.27

*Source:* Fieldwork, 2016

Apart from employing resident and itinerant male workers, this position of women commercial sugarcane farmers contrasts significantly with that of peasant women (Cheater, 1981: 367). As presented in Table 7, these women commercial farmers are making important production decisions as autonomous or semi-autonomous controllers of production, directly opposing the traditional farmer's wife position (Cheater, 1981: 355). These include decisions on which crops would be planted where and in what quantities; recruitment of hired labour as necessary (on a permanent or temporary basis); rather than being allotted portions of farmland for cultivation by others (Cheater, 1981: 365). As shown in Table 7 below, almost half (45%) of the female commercial farmers are responsible for critical production decisions on their farms. This compares

favourably with decision-making of their counterpart male commercial sugarcane farmers, where 53.8% of the male owners are responsible for production decisions on their farms.

**Table 7: Women Commercial Sugarcane Farmers and Farm Decision-Making**

Farm Decision Maker	Male Owner			Female Owner		Wife/Husband		Husband & Wife		Son		Manager/Supervisor		Chi-square p-value
	No		%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	
Mkwasi A2 Farmers	Male	7	58.3	0	0.0	1	8.3	2	16.6	1	8.3	4	33.3	.046
	Female	0	0.0	9	45.0	1	5.0	0	0.0	2	10.0	5	25.0	

*Source:* Fieldwork, 2016

While close to a quarter of female sugarcane farmers have delegated farm decision-making to their managers and supervisors, they remain accountable for all farm operations as owners. With a chi-square p-value of 0.46, no association was found between gender and decision-making, suggesting a transformation of production relation within Mkwasi sugarcane farming areas. With women responsible for key production decisions, this indicates a new work role for African women commercial farmers that contrasts markedly with that portrayed in the literature (Chiweshe, 2015).

## **Gender, Technology and Female Tractor Ownership in Mkwasi**

The literature on women in Western agriculture revealed tools and machinery, particularly the tractor, as gendered objects (Brandth, 1995: 125). Female ownership of the tractor as presented in Table 8 will transform the symbolic nature of the tractor as a sign of masculine identity in modern Zimbabwean agriculture (Brandth, 1995: 125)

**Table 8: Women and Tractor Ownership**

	<b>Tractor Ownership by Gender of Plot Holder</b>				
	Yes		No		
	Number	%	Number	%	
Mkwasi	Male	4	33.3	8	66.7
A2	Female	9	45.0	11	55.0
Farmers	<b>Total</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>40.6</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>59.4</b>

*Source: Fieldwork, 2016*

Table 8 indicates female commercial sugarcane farmers investing in productive assets, particularly tractors. In the Mkwasi sugarcane farming areas, female tractor ownership stood at 45% for female plot holders relative to 33% for male plot holders. This suggests that female land beneficiaries are investing more in productive assets compared to their male counterparts, partly explained by the relatively higher incomes from their agricultural production activities. These statistics corroborate findings from a household survey by the Sam Moyo Institute of Agrarian Studies indicating that in the A2 category, more women farmers own tractors at 45.8% relative to 41.5% for males (SMAIAS, 2014). If the tractor is a symbol of male identity in commercial agriculture, these statistics show that women commercial farmers are claiming this symbol of identity in commercial agriculture just as their male counterparts.

### **Women as Farmers, Mothers and Spouses**

While women commercial farmers in Zimbabwe have become more like men in many aspects of commercial farming, domestic work remains a key responsibility for women showing no sign of decline (Brandth, 2002: 183). Table 9 illustrates the interplay between the productive and reproductive aspects of work on sugarcane farms in Mkwasi, Chiredzi. As presented in Table 9, 35% of women commercial farmers reported spending four hours or more daily on housework. In other words, a third of the women reported a working day greater than 12 hours, combining time spent on productive work on the farm and social reproductive work in the household.

**Table 9: The Interplay Between Productive and Reproductive Work for Women Sugarcane Commercial Farmers in Chiredzi**

Social Reproduction Variable No		Female Commercial Sugarcane Farmers	
		% of total	
Time Spent on housework	< 3 Hrs	13	65.0
	4-6 Hrs	3	15.0
	> 6 Hrs	4	20.0
% Women reporting a working day (productive and reproductive work)	>12 hr Day	7	35.0
Feel time poverty	Yes	9	45.0
	No	8	40.0
	Undecided	3	15.0
Employ housemaid	Yes	8	40.0
	No	12	60.0

**Source:** Fieldwork, 2016

Over 40% of participating women sugarcane farmers felt time-poor and so could not engage in other activities such as leisure and personal care. Although interviewing men would have shed light on the matter of whether women sugarcane farmers felt more time-poor than men, it is clear nonetheless that a sizeable proportion of women (two-fifths) felt time-poor. The high incomes from the sugar enterprises enabled 40% of female commercial sugarcane producers to engage the services of paid domestic workers. However, from a feminist perspective, this is less progressive and transformative. It represents a classic case of “middle peasant” women off-loading their care burden on “other” lower-class women. That notwithstanding, these women sang the praises of paid domestic workers in the following words:

I had employed a maid to assist me with household chores. I bought a washing machine such that all the laundry is done while one is watching television. When it is cloudy, the machine would dry the clothes and the maid irons and packs them in the wardrobes. I feel my welfare has improved very well.

(In-depth Interview Female A2 Land Beneficiary 16 September 2016)

In the morning, I first go to the field to arrange all the work, which needs to be done. At least by 7 o'clock, I will be back at home to do my household tasks. I am balancing both productive and household work. Even still, I find time to rest. Besides I have employed a maid to assist me with household work.

(In-depth Interview Female A2 Land Beneficiary 17 September 2016)

I have employed a maid to assist with household work. As such I always have time to rest.

(In-depth Interview Female A2 Land Beneficiary 20 September 2016)

Although the option of engaging domestic paid helps represents one strategy for coping with the overburden of domestic work, it is a luxury for most women in low-income countries, whose household daily welfare depends on them to carry out these activities (Ferrant *et. al.*, 2014: 5). These experiences of women sugarcane commercial farmers in Mkwazine, Chiredzi confirm the overburdening triple roles of being a farmer, a housewife, and a mother at the same time (Haugen and Brandth, 1994: 221). This aspect remains a contradictory phenomenon for women keen to enter the male-dominated commercial agricultural occupation.

## Conclusion

Commercial agriculture, once a male-dominated occupation, holds potential as an important source of work for women. In the Zimbabwean context, the State-led land redistribution programme assisted a good number of women to enter into commercial sugarcane production, thus challenging the existing gender system in commercial agriculture. I argue that the observed gender inequalities in female and male participation in commercial farming are not due to any innate differences between the ability of men and women in performing these tasks but have their roots in structurally unequal power relations. Thus, attempts on the part of the State to redress this structural imbalance paid off, lending credence to the idea that land redistribution could be a transformative social policy that would fundamentally redefine gender relations in agrarian communities in Zimbabwe. On the face of it, this seemed to be true. With the State redistribution effort, commercial sugar production had become an important source of work for

African women, with 24.4% of sugarcane plots in Mkwasiine directly benefiting women in their own right by enabling them to obtain farms equal in size to that of men. As a result, women commercial sugarcane farmers were contributing proportionally to total sugarcane production in Mkwasiine. Access to farm sizes equal to that of men resulted in women obtaining farm incomes equal to and even surpassing that of their male counterparts, defying the common gender assumption of women being lower income earners than men. New women entrants into commercial farming are also engaged in specialised crop production workshops and many of them have become unionised, in some cases even taking on leadership roles, once the preserve of men. In addition, women commercial sugarcane farmers have become employers in their own right, taking autonomous critical production decisions on their farms. With increased tractor ownership, women commercial sugarcane farmers are also breaking gender barriers to identify themselves as “farmers” equal in status to men and obtaining prestige and status quite different from the farmer’s wife position.

However, the extent to which the land redistribution exercise was transformative is greatly limited by its inability to address the imbalances in the social reproduction burdens that women carry. The empirical evidence indicates “being a farmer, a housewife and a mother is just too much work for women” (Haugen and Brandth, 1994: 221). The latter remains a contradictory outcome for women venturing into commercial agricultural work.

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