



The role of women in managing the environmental crisis: A case study of Cyclone Idai in Chipinge, Zimbabwe

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Some of the environmental crises can be avoided, but others come unannounced and the adverse effects affect the communities as a whole with women, children and people with disabilities being affected the most. The world is in constant flux where climate changes are affecting the daily lives of humanity and the ecosystem as a whole. Global efforts towards environmental crises are in place including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Hyogo protocol and Sendai framework among other legislations, safeguarding the environment as a whole. Women have played many roles when responding, preparing and mitigating the adverse effects of environmental crises with some of the roles visible and others invisible and unpaid. Women have been involved in identifying hazards through their indigenous knowledge systems and manoeuvring ways for the continuity of lives in their local communities. This study utilised a qualitative research methodology. A case study of Cyclone Idai in Chipinge was explored. Moser's triple framework and the African Ecofeminist theory guided the discussions in this article.

Contribution: The article concluded by recommending that concerted efforts should be made to emancipate women and pragmatically embrace gender as an essential variable in the environmental crisis.

Keywords: communities; environmental crisis; ecofeminism; triple roles; Ubuntu; women.

Introduction

The world is often plagued with environmental abuses and injustices which increase the intensity and frequency of natural disasters (Powers 2018). In 2019 across Southern Africa, Malawi, Mozambique and Zimbabwe experienced Tropical Cyclone Idai that brought severe destruction and damage that impacted on lives, homes and livelihoods of many communities (OCHA 2019). Cyclone Idai dumped torrents of rain, causing dam collapses, extensive flooding and mudslides that caused widespread damage to ecosystems, buildings, infrastructure and crops. In Chipinge, Zimbabwe, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) (2019:74) noted that the cyclone severely damaged the district's water supply network, leaving more than 30 000 people without regular access to safe water. School facilities and public clinics suffered extensive damage and 45 000 homes were either damaged or completely destroyed. Intense cyclone winds caused extensive damage to private housing and public infrastructure, notably hospitals, clinics, schools, electrical systems, roads and bridge networks.

Regional and global forecast efforts provided accurate forecasting of the locations of landfalls and wind speeds for Cyclone Idai. The agents of change who included the local communities and national meteorological actors to alert agencies and communities in the storm's paths, however, encountered challenges in issuing and disseminating storm warnings to the community (Domakin 2014). The environment is a combination of all natural resources, both living and non-living that plants and animals depend on for their existence. In Zimbabwe, the *Environmental Management Act* (Chapter 20:27) defines an environment as all natural and man-made resources found in the lithosphere and atmosphere which include water, soil, minerals and living organisms. The environmental crisis is one of the challenges impacting flora and fauna (Dominelli 2017). The United Nations (2013) further notes that the environmental crisis is one of the worst problems faced by people, which lead to the displacement of communities, breaking of family ties and even loss of lives, damages to infrastructure and the ecosystem.

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Zimbabwe is one of the countries suffering from the worst consequences of the environmental crisis that involve water pollution, land pollution, air pollution, illegal mining, veld fires and deforestation. The country is still experiencing drastic consequences of climate change and of the depletion of the ozone layer. A good example is the Tokwe-Mukosi floods 2013–2014, which led to the displacement of thousands of people in southern Masvingo at Chingwizi camp. According to Chikodzi and Mutowo (2014), natural disasters such as the Tokwe-Mukosi disaster in 2013–2014 could have been avoided by timely dissemination of relevant information concerning climate change and natural disasters. Hence, based on the above mentioned evidence, academics in the social sciences must address the impacts of these environmental crises on women and children.

Women are vulnerable to environmental crisis effects as they constitute the majority of the world's poor and are more dependent for their livelihood on natural resources that are threatened by climate change. Furthermore, women and children are the primary caregivers that face social and economic hurdles which already limit their capacity to cope, yet they are highly dependent on local natural resources for their livelihood. According to the World Bank (2014), in Africa, women constitute a larger proportion of those involved in food production through their active involvement in agricultural activities.

The Beijing Platform for Action notes the importance of a holistic and multidisciplinary approach in dealing with environmental issues (UN Women 1995). The sustainable development goals (SDGs) also restate the importance of including women in addressing the challenges caused by the environmental crisis and the entire wellbeing of communities. This holistic approach is vital for development and sustainability to take place (United Nations 2015). Zimbabwe has also crafted the Vision 2030 policy which aims at transforming the country to a middle-income economy through the inclusion of diverse stakeholders, including women. According to Zimbabwe's Vision 2030, development should take place through two phases that include the National Development Strategy 1 (NDS1-2021–2025) and National Development Strategy 2 (NDS2-2026–2030). Various international programmes that appreciate the role played by women in responding to environmental issues include Women as the Voice for the Environment (WAVE); it was organised by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), in close collaboration with civil society groups and the Network of Women Ministers on Environment are also in place. Despite the availability of legislative instruments and programmes on environmental management that are in place in Zimbabwe, there is a paucity of resources for implementation which makes efforts to mitigate the adverse effects of the environmental crisis on women and children to move at a snail's pace, exposing them to further risks.

Background and context

Historically, across the globe, culture suppressed the potential of women guided by values and norms which regarded women as a weak species who could not do heavy

work (Sen & Grown 1987). The women have been relegated to the kitchen and their labour has been unpaid, especially in agrarian and patriarchal communities (Chigb 2015; Gyan & Mfoafo-M'Carthy 2021; Pappart 1995). Women were regarded as second-class citizens. Their reproductive roles such as childbearing, feeding and executing household chores were at the expense of production and community roles. Women make up one-half of the human population (World Bank 2014). The involvement of women in environmental management, disaster response and crisis interventions needs to be appreciated in Africa (OCHA 2019). The bulk of women are involved in primary caregiving for children, the elderly, dependent relatives and the sick. They are also responsible for family counselling, family reunifications, member tracing and comforting those in grief.

Zimbabwe also ratified international instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the 1995 Convention on Civil and Political Rights, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) Protocol on Gender and Development and the Protocol to the African Charter on the Rights of Women in Africa. United Nations (2014) emphasises the importance of recognising women as key drivers in the fulfilment of the SDGs; it restates that the policy should address country-specific needs. There is the need to redress the disproportionate impact of economic, social and environmental setbacks on women and their vital roles in sustaining their families and communities.

In Zimbabwe, the Constitution of Zimbabwe Sections 17 and 56 provide for gender equality and equity among all citizens. The same thrust is also maintained by the National Gender Policy (2017), Women Economic Empowerment Framework of 2011, and the creation of The Ministry of Women Affairs, Community, Small and Medium Enterprises Development (GoZ 2019). Despite the great strides made in the past decades through the enactment of national pieces of legislation ratifying global and regional treaties, the role of women in developing economies remains unclear. The article seeks to give insight into the role of women in the management of environmental crises.

The importance of understanding the different impacts of natural disasters on women, men, boys and girls is slowly trickling into mainstream disaster preparedness and response systems, as well as international relief efforts (OCHA 2019). When an environmental crisis occurs, women and girls search further afield for resources and become more vulnerable to injuries because of carrying heavy loads over long distances; they also undergo a higher risk of sexual harassment, assault and health deteriorations perpetuating the cycle of disempowerment. The consequences of the increased environmental crisis are far-reaching, particularly for vulnerable groups including women and children who are responsible for water management at the household level.

The environmental crisis also impacts on agricultural production and the care of livestock. It also increases the overall amount of labour that is expended to collect, store, protect and distribute water (Mabvurira 2017). According to the UN (2019) terms of health, some potential climate change scenarios include increased morbidity and mortality because of heat waves, floods, storms, fires and droughts.

Ecofeminist perspectives on African women and the ecological crisis: Understanding Cyclone Idai in Zimbabwe

Ecofeminism is important to the analysis in this chapter. This term was first coined by a French feminist named Francoise d'Eaubanne in 1974 as explained by Merchant (1992). The understanding is that women and nature are both victims of oppression, hence, the need to free them. Susan Rakoczy (2006) argues that there is a relationship that exists between nature and women. The basic assumption of ecofeminism is that sustainability can be assured if both men and women are involved in the planning, mitigation and response against disasters. There is a need of both men and women as disasters are not gender-sensitive. When disasters occur, they are not gender-sensitive; everyone is affected and so in response, there is a need to include everyone (Dankelman 2010). If the precepts of ecofeminism are to be used in preparing, mitigating and responding to the environmental crisis, the world can be a better place in terms of environmental management.

Women experience a host of negative consequences during and after a natural disaster. There is an interconnectedness of women and nature that can be utilised as a tool to foster eco-dialogue. As a mother knows her child, so do they know and appreciate nature. The environmental crisis is interpreted diversely by Christian religious backgrounds and paradigms, with Christianity and African Traditional Religion believing in the power of the Most High (Greta 2017). How Christians care for the environment is unique; they nurture nature. The role of the church in ecological issues is evident through the feminist approach to ecology (Bowen 2013; Chirongoma, Manda & Myeni 2008).

There is an interconnectedness between humanity and the environment, specifically women and the environment. Women form part of the agents involved in the retrieval of indigenous knowledge systems. Ifechelobi and Asika (2017) also stress that the subjugation of women and the oppression of nature are linked together. The immanence of God, the sacredness of the world, and wholeness of the body, are considered to be the life that should exist. Therefore, there is a need for a paradigm shift to end human domination of non-human nature because of the interconnectedness of the humanity and nature (Gough & Whitehouse 2020; Greta 2017). More particularly, women have been identified with nature since time immemorial, symbolising the relationship between women and the environment. Sometimes, children are named after animals and trees. The earth is abused by humanity and so are women abused, and they have a key

role in environmental crisis response, recovery, mitigation strategies and preparedness.

This study resonates with Chirongoma and Chitando's (2021) study that was carried out in Chimanimani after the occurrence of Cyclone Idai. Their study investigated the causes of the cyclone as well as the beliefs of the residents as they sought answers as to why such a destructive cyclone happened, hence the lamentation in the title of their paper, 'What happened to our mountain?' This question was raised in light of the fact that the sacred mountain in Chimanimani, which used to be a place of sanctuary for many years, turned out to become a force of destruction for those who so much believed in its protection. The current study borrows the idea that when disasters occur, women bear the brunt, but further delves into linking this occurrence with its impact on women as it is argued that women's roles are often doubled or tripled when disaster looms. Chirongoma and Chitando (2021), in discussing Cyclone Idai, write:

[T]hey believe that whenever they maintain peaceful and harmonious relations with the spirit world, they will be guaranteed safety, protection and abundance of life. Conversely, whenever relations with the spirit world have been negatively interrupted, there will be far reaching repercussions just as what transpired in the Cyclone Idai calamity. (p. 78)

The above concept is buttressed by Greta (2017) who emphasises the role of a woman as a mother and shield, in the same way the mother acts as a protector. The environment is expected to sustain and protect the people and the environment in the same way. The understanding of the role played by women when disasters occur, is quite essential in that women are interpreted in their metaphorical aspect and representation as Mother Earth. Women are the caretakers of the land. It is the environment that the women till to feed the children of the land. There is a relationship between women and nature, both physical and symbolic, symbolic in the sense that if the physical mother is tempered with or angered, disasters are bound to happen (Greta 2017). If there is rape and murder of women or if there is sin in the land, disasters are bound to happen.

Research methodology

The broad aim of the study was to explore the impact of the global environmental crisis on African women and communities using the case study of women's experiences in Chipinge, Zimbabwe. As such, the study seeks to profile the impact of the environmental crisis on women and communities in Chipinge, Zimbabwe, with a specific focus on the aftermath of the Cyclone Idai disaster which struck in March 2019. Data were collected from March to May 2022 in Chipinge West, specifically Chikore and Chibuwe areas which are situated in a valley. Chipinge is located in Manicaland Province, in southeastern Zimbabwe, close to the border of Zimbabwe and Mozambique with an estimated population of 133 810 (ZIMSTAT 2012). Slightly more than half the population (52%) in the district are females. The study adopted a qualitative approach to help the researchers

to uncover, describe and understand the impact of the environmental crisis on women and communities in Chipinge, Zimbabwe from the study participants' point of view (Creswell 2014; Rubin & Babbie 2011). Within the qualitative research approach, a case study design was chosen to help understand the impact of the environmental crisis on women and communities in Chipinge, Zimbabwe. This enabled the researchers to be in a position to profile the impact of the environmental crisis on women and communities from the participants' perspectives. A total of 14 participants from the Chipinge community were selected utilising the snowball sampling technique. Semi-structured in-depth interview guides were used as the main data collection instruments. Bryman (2012) and Creswell (2014) note that semi-structured interview schedules use open-ended questions to allow participants to express their perspectives. With a specific focus on the aftermath of the Cyclone Idai catastrophe, the study participants were asked questions relating to the impact of the environmental crisis on women and communities in Chipinge, Zimbabwe. The interviews were tape-recorded to obtain the actual narratives from the interviewees. Patton (2002) holds that audio recording enables researchers to obtain accurate perspectives of interviewees. Ethical clearance was obtained from relevant ethical boards and participating organisations. Also, for ethical reasons, consent to participate and record interviews was sought from each participant. The data were analysed using the thematic content analysis. Guest et al. (2012:15) describe this method of qualitative data analysis as eclectic as it draws from a broad range of several theoretical and methodological perspectives. From the participants' narratives and documents reviewed, the researchers looked for common themes and recurring words related to the impact of the environmental crisis on women and communities in Chipinge, Zimbabwe. The quality of data collected was assessed in terms of credibility through member checking (from the same category of participants) and confirmability where the findings were reiterated by the other participants (Schurink, Fouche & De Vos 2011).

Research results

Notwithstanding the demographic characteristics of women in societies, findings through the use of thematic analysis pointed out three key roles of women in the environmental crisis: reproductive roles, community roles and productive roles in the form of paid labour. These roles are presented and discussed below.

Increased reproductive roles

Women, because of their socialisation and biological makeup, are likely to assume reproductive roles. From the 14 files reviewed in this study, it was evident that women are socialised to be child-bearers and to assume responsibilities of taking care of the elderly and sick among other vulnerable groups within the families and the extended families. Participants identified household chores as a key role played by women in their homes. Participants also observed that

women, despite not being remunerated for daily chores, spend a huge amount of time trying to redefine houses into homes for their children, spouses, in-laws and the extended family. The reproductive role played by women is evident in the following comments made by the participants:

'Our houses were destroyed, we are still living in the tents, food and health are being provided at the minimal level. We still have to travel long distances to fetch water, get firewood to prepare meals with the assistance of girl children. Another major challenge is that my mother in-law got injured and became disabled during the cyclone Idai disaster as the house fell on her. She is no longer mobile and requires my primary care yet I have other little children who also need my attention. I have to endure the whole caregiving burden, there is no one to assist me.' (Participant 1)

Similarly, another participant said:

'I lost my child during the Cyclone Idai disaster, I could not bury my child as we usually do, no proper funeral was done. It stresses me day in and day out, the thought of my son's body not being retrieved is a major cause of concern. Traditionally, one gets closure through seeing the body of the dead and witnessing the burial. However, not seeing his body has brought so much anxiety and worry in my life.' (Participant 2)

It is evident from the account of study participant 1 that the girl child has always assumed the household chores from a very tender age and contributed largely to the reproductive roles which then tampered with her schooling in the aftermath of the environmental crisis. Women form the primary agents of socialisation with regard to speech therapy, cognitive skills, how to walk, talk, as well as teaching the socially desirable behaviours aligned to cultural norms and values within societies. The selected accounts above show that women are differently impacted by the environmental crisis (Clark et al. 2019; Richardson et al. 2018). Various explanations as to why women carry the reproductive roles are aligned to the traditional socialisation process (Manyonganise 2010; Mawere 2012). One possible explanation is their reproductive role which includes taking care of household chores, the sick, the elderly, those living with disabilities and the younger siblings (Moser 1993). In a normal society, the reproductive roles can be done without worrying about the challenges that come in the aftermath of an environmental crisis. It therefore becomes a double burden on women to perform multiple tasks as they try to restructure their homes and make everyone feel at home that is a conducive environment for the children, the elderly and those experiencing ill-health among others. This is reiterated by Chirongoma and Chitando (2021) who argue that women bear the major brunt when disasters hit communities.

The roles that women play in society are increased as they continue to be the primary caregivers as the mothers and also the mother to the earth (Greta 2017). Women play a crucial role in protecting the environment as they also protect their children, family and communities being rooted in Christianity (Chirongoma 2010). Manyonganise (2015) also utilises diverse expressions in appreciation of the role played by

women in environmental management and life as a whole. For example, the Shona proverb, 'mudzimu waamai wadambura mbereko', is usually uttered when disasters occur, implying that the maternal ancestors have chosen to withdraw their protection from the individual. The counsel enshrined in this proverb foregrounds the need for children to ensure that their behaviour does not offend their mothers and that way, they would be assured of protection from their maternal spirits, which are believed to be the strongest and capable of providing protection for their progeny (Manyonganise 2015). According to Maslow's (1987) hierarchy of needs, unless the physiological needs of an individual are met, one cannot contribute fully towards their development. Women and communities play a pivotal role in creating a suitable environment for individuals to survive during and after an environmental crisis.

Increased community roles

From the participants' accounts, it was also evident that community roles such as holding social events and activities to improve and care for community resources often voluntarily, are often assumed by women as noted below;

One of the participants noted that:

'We are still in the process of helping members of our communities to go through the grief process, as other children were left orphaned, homeless and without any family tracing.' (Participant 3)

Likewise, another participant said:

'We can hardly settle knowing that our neighbors who have become disabled cannot access water which is now very far. We therefore assist them by fetching water and firewood for them so that they can sustain their lives. We have a group where we take turns to assist those who are no longer able to help themselves so that they can live comfortably as well.' (Participant 4)

Another participant said:

'We have gardens where we have a variety of vegetables to assist the entire community's nutrition where some able-bodied women spend most of their time trying to reconstruct the gardens. It is a cumbersome task as we also have chores to do at home yet the community equally needs us. It is very straining, we now have to work so hard such that when we go to sleep, we will sleep like a baby.' (Participant 5)

It is evident from the participants' accounts above, that women play multiple roles in the communities, which enhance the lives of people in the societies through their innovations and collective action. Women play a crucial role in supporting the existence of informal social security in Zimbabwe through pooling resources together to assist those undergoing bereavement and also with other initiatives that can sustain the communities. Looking at the findings above, a concept of solidarity is embedded within societies giving an opportunity for people to engage with each other in the community interconnectedness of human beings.

This current finding validates (Dominelli 2018; Mabvurira 2014; Mashokane 2017) who also mention that women are the knowledge base of communities and they utilise this

knowledge to assist in disaster interpretation, recovery, response and mitigation through their indigenous knowledge systems. Women often share the initiatives and innovations by interpreting certain hazards. For example, more locusts on the low stream bank could be a sign of an upcoming drought which can be noticed by women as they will be washing or fetching water for the gardens. Women also acted as educationalists within the communities on ways to safeguard water by forming taboos so that people can keep the environment safe. According to Bichierri (2006), the use of taboos in indigenous societies served to teach good moral behaviour within societies.

According to Beland (2010), social protection refers to programmes that aim to support the poor, fight inequality and promote citizenship solidarity, reduce market dependency to protect workers and their families against specific economic risks. Social protection has a great effect on citizens especially when the economy is going through hard times, for instance, at a time when national security is at stake or when the country is facing natural disasters. According to Mashokane (2017), social protection can be formal or informal, with the government providing formal social protection through various selection measures and informal social protection being assumed by the extended families and communities. Zimbabwe utilises a residual model of welfare whereby the government can only intervene as the last resort after exhausting all the channels of welfare (Mabvurira 2017). Diverse roles played by women in response to an environmental crisis also add an extra burden on women.

The current findings also illuminate the UN SDG (2015); empowering women is seen as key to reducing poverty and improving the health and wellbeing of future generations. Various factors can explain why there is less research on the role of women in development as well as explaining why most of their domestic roles continue to be categorised as unpaid as they are more likely to be mothers and caregivers. Given their biological make-up and socialisation process, women are most likely to be constant primary caregivers in communities.

Loss of livelihoods

Another notable impact of the environmental crisis was the loss of livelihoods as a result of the perishing of domestic animals, and the destruction of agricultural produce and infrastructure ranging from educational facilities to health facilities and power. All of the 14 participants in this study mentioned that they had experienced a loss of livelihoods. For instance, one of the study participants shared the following:

'I am a teacher by profession; however, our school was destroyed by the Cyclone Idai damage. I used to stay at the school with free accommodation. I had managed to secure my movable property but I am back to square one now, I have nothing, save for my life.' (Participant 6)

The disruption on farming activities was another major challenge mentioned by another participant who said the following:

'As a farmer, we used to have irrigation schemes that made it possible for us to meet our daily needs. We grew up knowing that "musha mukadzi" (a home is made complete by women), so we do not sit and fold our hands. Rather, we make use of every opportunity.' (Participant 7)

The damage of infrastructure and its negative impact on business operations was also noted by one of the participants who put it across as follows:

'I am a retailer, I sell products from South Africa, the products are supplied by runners (agents), now that most of the roads were destroyed and power is still a challenge, it has become very difficult to engage in any meaningful business activities. I have not yet recovered from the devastating effects of Cyclone Idai, I am still trying to make ends meet.' (Participant 8)

The interruption of informal business enterprises such as the food industry was also mentioned by one of the participants who said:

'I used to cook sadza as early as 6 am, targeting the combi drivers and farmers. I managed to send all my children to school through my little canteen. However, everything was destroyed, I hardly have a starting point.' (Participant 9)

It is evident from the selected accounts by participants used in the study, that the impact of the environmental crisis has a devastating effect on the livelihoods of many people. In terms of access to educational facilities and health services where people had limited access, it is now a double impact because of the environmental crisis.

Implications for development

Given the profiles presented above, the impact of the environmental crisis on women and communities must be acknowledged reflecting the different dimensions taken by women to ensure continuity of lives in communities. The current study confirms that women are involved in caregiving roles, community enhancement roles and productive roles. While women contribute tremendously to development from all angles, that is socially, economically, politically, environmentally, technologically and legally, community women are usually insufficiently acknowledged and sometimes not acknowledged at all, let alone invited in formal planning and execution. Therefore, a paradigm shift into acknowledging their roles is needed in ensuring sustainability within communities (Clarke 2018). The impact of the environmental crisis on women and communities cannot be overemphasised (Clarke et al. 2019).

The findings reiterate how women multitask roles to sustain the welfare of their families and communities without asking what the government can offer them (Kennedy 1961). Women form the key actors involved in child protection, climate change interpretation, disaster management, response, mitigation strategies, taking care of the vulnerable in society, and forming social groups and informal social protection in communities. The findings of the study further show that women of all ages are involved in the development of a society.

Conclusion

The article concludes that women are responsible for teaching socially desirable behaviours aligned with cultural norms and values until they can contribute to development on their own. There is a need to consider sending feedback to communities on the role played by women through a robust approach from academics, practice, stakeholders, and policymakers to keep encouraging women on their role in the development agenda. The critical players in environmental management should have combined training programmes and should conduct workshops on how to prepare women to cope amid the adverse effects of the environmental crisis.

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Competing interests

The authors have declared that no competing interest exists.

Authors' contributions

M.R.M. wrote and conceptualised the article, M.S.Y. was the supervisor of the article.

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Data availability

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Disclaimer

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