


The Game Changer: An Exposition of Changes in Gender Roles in Shona Communities During and After the Wave of COVID-19 in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic, which reached Zimbabwe's borders in March 2020, precipitated significant life-changing events. Traditionally, men and women had clearly defined gender roles that were culturally expected of each group. The introduction of Christianity and the influence of Western civilizations further altered these roles over time. However, it was not until March 2020 that the Zimbabwean community faced another transformative force: Covid-19. This pandemic introduced a 'new normal' that significantly impacted gender roles, particularly for women. This paper analyses how the phase of COVID-19 in Zimbabwe has reshaped these roles. It employs Afrocentricity and Africana womanism as frameworks for examining these changes. Qualitative research aspects were also used to gather and analyze the data. The findings brought to the fore the evolving gender roles and their implications for Shona women. The research reveals that the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly increased women's responsibilities. They have taken on additional roles, including caring for ill family members, searching for various remedies for ailments, and stepping into the father figure role after the loss of their husbands. It has also been highlighted that the additional gender roles brought about by the pandemic continue to be perpetuated in the contemporary community.

Keywords: Gender roles, Africana Womanism, Afrocentricity, Shona people, COVID-19

Introduction

Women's roles have been defined throughout history, especially within African communities following the colonial era. Patriarchy has relegated women to second-class citizens, with their primary role often viewed as procreation and serving men. According to Anyidoho, Tagoe, Adjei, Appiah, Yeboah-Banin, Crentsil, Oduro-Frimpong, Owusu, and Torvikey (2016),

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patriarchy is a social system in which men hold power over women in social, economic, and political realms.

The Shona people, like many other African communities affected by colonialism, primarily have a patriarchal society where norms and values are instilled during childhood. Chivasa (2019) suggests that the Shona are the largest ethnic group in Zimbabwe. Raftopoulos and Mlambo (2009) further explain that the term "Shona" is a collective label for the socio-cultural, political, and linguistic traits of an ethnic group that only identified as the Shona in the late 19th century. Mester (2008) and Zimuto and Murape (2024) describe the Shona as having a patrilineal culture. Thus, gender roles in this community are, in most cases, skewed in favour of men.

From a young age, children in this community are assigned specific gender roles. Girls are taught to perform household chores, such as washing dishes and cleaning the home, while boys are encouraged to engage in activities like gardening and other physically demanding tasks. These stereotypes begin at birth, reinforcing harmful notions that obstruct progress toward equal rights for both men and women. Men tend to develop a sense of entitlement, while women are often confined to domestic roles, as discussed by Anyidoho et al. (2016). Neo-colonial societies often propagate ideologies that treat women as inferior to men. However, Mbiti (2011) presents a contrasting view of women in traditional African society, highlighting that their ability to give birth was regarded as divine and closely tied to God's purpose. Consequently, motherhood was seen as a highly important role within the African community. Given this perspective, it is not unreasonable to assert that traditional Shona culture established complementary roles for men and women.

In the aftermath of colonialism, men were led to believe that women's place was in the kitchen. This belief has been perpetuated through teachings passed down to women from their aunts as they grow up. These teachings emphasise homemaking and the notion of women as objects of pleasure for men. They also focus on the toughness required for women to endure the burdens of marriage and the responsibilities of caring for extended families.

The Beijing Declaration, adopted by the United Nations at the end of the Fourth World Women's Conference in 1995, established a set of principles regarding the rights that should be accorded to both men and women. This declaration marked a significant breakthrough, particularly for African women who had long played subservient roles in patriarchal and capitalistic societies shaped by colonialism, such as the Shona community.

The Beijing Declaration marked a significant step forward in promoting women's empowerment and ensuring equal rights to opportunities and resources. However, inequalities

persist, and women's rights continue to be undermined both at home and in the workplace. A clear example of this is the "glass ceiling," a metaphor for the barriers that prevent women from reaching top positions in most companies. Many women who do attain the role of Chief Executive Officer often find themselves leading struggling companies that no male candidates are willing to manage. This situation sets women up for failure, which seems to serve a misguided purpose.

Barreto, Ryan, and Schmitt (2009) argue that the existence of the glass ceiling highlights the discrimination faced by women in the workplace, as evidenced by their underrepresentation in senior leadership roles. Eagly and Sczesny (2009) acknowledge that while the number of women in leadership positions has increased, men still dominate top roles and make the majority of key decisions across all economic sectors. These dynamics illustrate how women continue to be relegated to the periphery both at home and at work.

Be that as it may, the COVID-19 pandemic has also significantly influenced gender roles within the Shona community, prompting a re-evaluation of traditional norms and practices. Before the pandemic, gender roles were often well-defined, especially in rural areas, with men frequently occupying breadwinner positions while women were primarily responsible for domestic duties. In urban setups, the tables were slowly but surely turning, with men and women now holding almost equal status. However, as the pandemic necessitated lockdowns and restricted movement, many lost employment, leading to a shift in economic and social responsibilities. This unprecedented situation forced families to adapt, often resulting in women stepping into roles that challenged conventional expectations.

Additionally, the pandemic highlighted existing inequalities and brought to light both the strengths and weaknesses within the Shona community's social structure. Women, traditionally seen as caregivers, played a vital role in supporting their families during the crisis, often juggling multiple responsibilities, including remote education for children and caring for sick family members. This scenario fostered a sense of resilience and adaptability among women, encouraging some to question and negotiate their roles within the household, thereby contributing to a gradual shift in perceptions of gender dynamics.

In the aftermath of the pandemic, the transformations in gender roles appear to be lasting. As communities begin to recover, many women who temporarily took on new responsibilities have expressed a desire to retain their roles. While challenges remain, such as the risk of reverting to traditional roles, the COVID-19 experience has undeniably sparked an ongoing dialogue about gender equality in the Shona community. As such, this research paper discusses the

additional roles women assumed due to the pandemic and how these roles continue to be reinforced in contemporary communities.

Theoretical Framework

This research is hinged on Afrocentricity and Africana Womanism. These theories were chosen due to their view on African people in general and African women in particular. African women and men are not enemies; they have complementary roles. According to the above-mentioned theories, it is not inherent in Africans to view their men and women as opposite sex, but they view each other as complimenting facets of the same puzzle. Dove (2016) has it that, although women face challenges which emanate from the way the West has imposed its worldview on Africans, African women still want their sons to respect women and work together as partners in resolving gender issues that they face as a race. The above postulation points to the idea that women and men in Africa are not enemies, but they strive to work in unison as they forge ahead in the contemporary world. This line of thinking was applied as different roles by women during and after the COVID-19 era were untangled and analysed.

Research Methodology

The research employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to gather comprehensive and nuanced data. Participants were meticulously selected from a diverse range of rural and urban communities within the Masvingo Province of Zimbabwe, utilising a systematic random sampling technique to ensure a representative mix in terms of age, gender, socio-economic status, and educational background. These participants were named Participants A to L in the research for ethical reasons.

Data collection was robust and multi-faceted, involving deep engagement with the communities through participant observations that allowed for a real-time understanding of social dynamics and cultural practices. This was complemented by in-depth, semi-structured interviews with key informants, which provided personal narratives and insights. Additionally, thoughtfully designed questionnaires were distributed to a wider population, enabling the collection of quantifiable data that could be statistically analysed. To enhance the depth of the discussions stemming from the research questions, document analysis was incorporated as a key element of the research approach.

The data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, a rigorous and systematic approach that facilitated the identification and exploration of significant themes related to the participants' experiences and perspectives. This process included coding the data, identifying patterns, and developing themes that were subsequently examined in relation to the research questions. The resultant themes were intricately developed into the central findings of the research, yielding valuable insights into the unique mutations in gender roles faced by the Shona community, as well as their coping mechanisms and resilience strategies in the context of these changes.

Pre-Colonial Shona Communities and The Roles of Women

Women have had defined roles even before the coming of the white man in the Zimbabwean borders. Moagi and Mtombeni (2020) say that historical analysis by gender oppression schools shy far away from how gender roles were like for both sexes socially, economically and politically and tend to point out women as victims of patriarchy. The findings by Moagi and Mtombeni (2020) point to the idea that women participated in the social and economic activities of the community, complementing the men, who traditionally are considered the head of the house. The gender roles were defined, and men and women participated in a wide range of activities in the communities they lived in. Women were held in high regard in society, contrary to what was happening during the colonial era. Men and women had different roles that were equal and complementary. Such an arrangement ensured that despite men being regarded as the head of the house, no one was more equal than the other. The Western world view that women in precolonial societies were relegated to the domestic sphere, especially motherhood, is refuted by Mugalla (2021), who says that the role of women as mothers and nourishers was an important one and it emphasises the importance of gender roles in precolonial African societies. The women were the nourishment managers of the traditional communities. This role was a very vital role which enabled and enhanced community continuity.

Mester (2008) posits that the issue of women's subordination in the precolonial era does not usually bring about the noted debate. However, the issue of women's subordination in patrilineal societies is undeniable. Cheater (1986) advances the fact that Shona women in precolonial Zimbabwe participated in growing the economies of their societies as they could invest in livestock. However, they were not allowed to own land. Moagi and Mtombeni (2020) posit that women in Southern Africa were never relegated to the domestic sphere but had other equally important roles they played in society in production, religion and politics, such as

prophets, diviners, rainmakers, farmers, princesses and queens. This shows that women were considered partners in other spheres of the community other than the typical role of being mothers and wives. Beach (1980) notes that women contributed immensely in agriculture and metallurgy, though they did not control the means of production. This assertion is indicative of the independence of women in precolonial Zimbabwe to participate in socio-economic activities despite their exclusion from owning land in their own right. Cheater (1986) explains that women were excluded from owning land because the bride price (dowry/lobola) had been paid for them, which transferred her labour and reproductive rights from her family to that of her husband. Moagi and Mtombeni (2020) posit that despite all that, pre-colonial women in Southern Africa were very independent. Thus, the concept of Shona women's participation in socio-economic activities in pre-colonial Zimbabwe is equated to the class of labour in industrial systems of production. Women were great workers who had powerful decision-making powers in various facets of the Shona community. They had political, economic and social influence in their communities, as shown by the above assertions. These roles were thus carried into the colonial era and later into post-colonial Zimbabwe.

In pre-colonial Zimbabwe, women were regarded in high esteem, as noted by respondent E's sentiments. Respondent E said that the Shona people valued their women and listened to their opinions, for instance, the likes of Charwe, the medium of Mbuya Nehanda, who up to now is still considered the greatest spirit medium enough to warrant a statute put in place for her in Harare which is Zimbabwe's capital city. Her bravery is equated to that of Queen Nzinga Mbande of Angola, who had similar considerable military exploits just like seen in the first Chimurenga. Chikafa (2019) concur aptly with the sentiments of the respondent when he alludes to how African women were held in high esteem to the point of being conscripted into their society army and leading men and women to victory, but unfortunately, their significance to society was lost along the way with the advent of colonialism. Moagi and Mtombeni (2020) assert that it was normal for women to accompany their men during military expeditions. Such roles played by women are a reflection of the tenets of Africana womanism, where African women united with their men in struggle and commitment to their societies. Women and men played complementary roles during the colonial era. Their biological differences were considered where necessary, but that did not justify any discrimination against women or men. Women played a huge role in African Traditional Religion, which the Shona people are very particular about and hold in high regard. Mbuya Nehanda, through her medium Charwe, is a typical example. To serve the gods effectively, some women regarded as *mbonga* never got married or involved themselves in sexual activities. Such women were usually mediums of the

ancestral spirits and led men and women in Shona society on what to do in the socio-economic and political undertakings. Adjepong (2015) agrees with the above thoughts and adds on by saying that pre-colonial African women exercised power and authority in their patrilineal and matrilineal lineage through their characters, diplomacy, husbands and heredity just like men did in other respects. This clearly shows that women played a major role in the religious circles of the Shona community.

Women's opinions mattered, and this can be seen by their being able to sit at traditional gatherings '*dare*' to deliberate on community issues. Respondent A said that women could act as a father figure if the actual father was not there or deceased. The respondent goes on to say that in such scenarios, a woman could lead the clan and show them where to bury their dead. This is called *kutara guva* in Shona (to mark a grave site). Such happenings indicate how women alternated with men on being heads of the house despite the colonial adage that only men could hold such positions. Cheater (1986) notes that with marriage, women assumed a lot of roles other than being wives and mothers for example, by the time a woman had grandchildren, she was a force to reckon with both as a '*tete*' in her paternal family and as a mother-in-law. Thus, women had alternating roles in the families they came from and married into. This is also why Adjepong (2015) says that existing evidence confirms that women were very active in all aspects of the community and the Shona proverb '*musha mukadzi*' (behind every successful man, there is a woman) is not a myth but reality. The above assertion serves to confirm the Africana and Shona perspective that gender roles are complementary.

Colonial-Oriented Gender Roles in the Shona Community of Africa

Anyidoho et al. (2016) posit that the role of women in Africa was disrupted by the advent of colonialism, whereby colonial ideas and practices were enforced on African tradition, which initially had norms and values where men and women had different roles that were equal and complementary. The arrival of colonialists changed the status quo of women. Christianity was used to subdue women into submission. Colonial education inducted men to seem like a superior breed, brainwashing them to think and act like the white men wanted. Stoeltje, Allman, Geiger, and Nakanyike (2003) also point out that colonial education propagated undesirable gender roles, with women being educated to become docile homemakers and submissive Christian wives. The decorum of African women was denuded by the continual Christian indoctrination of the African communities. Women were relegated to being masters of petty family issues in the community. Such a distorted notion of women is the reason why Africana womanism tries to claim back black women's lost identities.

The colonial masters' perception of a woman's place in the community was cemented by statutes that dictated that women could do nothing without the permission of their male guardians. Such dictates pushed the agenda that women were inferior to men, and their needs were seen as unnecessary and swept under the rug. Stoeltje et al. (2003) agree with they also highlighted that the colonial administration infringed on women's equal rights by placing them under male guardianship, which served to reinforce the image of women as wives and homemakers. The fact that women required the permission of a male guardian to do anything, even looking for a job, shows how Shona women's rights had hit rock bottom since pre-colonial Zimbabwe, where women were considered equal partners despite varying roles both women and men played in the society. The colonialists distorted gender roles and discourse on African womanhood.

During the colonial era, women could not own land or property, and Cheater (1986) says that the Native Land Husbandry Act of 1951 is a testament to the inequalities in gender roles and place in society brought by the white man. Legislation was used to subdue women into submission. Vengesai (2019) postulates that depriving women of access to means of production had a negative bearing on them as they automatically became economically dependent on men. This deviation was a far cry from notions of womanhood in pre-colonial Shona societies, where women were empowered socially and economically. Such mangled perceptions of Shona womanhood enforced through law by the colonialists drove novelist Tsitsi Dangarembwa to write *Nervous Conditions*, a book that highlights the struggles of Shona women in colonial Zimbabwe, educated or not. The book shows the colonial discourse about African womanhood and how women were now being 'othered'. Women were seen as helpless beings at the mercy of men. Participant A also echoed the same sentiments when she said, 'Our grandparents always told us stories about women who were punished and caricatured if they failed to obey their husbands.' The finding thus reinforces the postulation that women during the colonial era were regarded as objects which operated at the mercy of men.

Moagi and Mtombeni (2020) in their research noted that gender cooperation was prevalent in Precolonial Zimbabwe, but this discourse became different in colonial Zimbabwe. The above discussion brings to the fore the fact that, during the colonial era, the Shona women were through various shenanigans by the colonialists and relegated to the community periphery, and hence, their being was downgraded to being community 'others'.

Post-independence Shona Communities and the Roles of Women

Independence in Zimbabwe brought relief for both men and women in Shona societies who had suffered under the rule of the British Empire. The women who had participated in the liberation struggle challenged the subservient image of womanhood cemented during the colonial era. They fought alongside men, and some got opportunities to study outside the country later on. Such women gave others the strength to push forward the agenda for freedom socially, economically and politically. This allowed women to fight for equal rights, which had been suppressed during the colonial era. Berlant (2011) is quick to point out that female freedom fighters had a hard time trying to transition into politics after the war because they were labelled prostitutes for having strayed far from patriarchal control during the second Chimurenga and for not conforming to conventional roles of being wives and mothers. Such kind of labels and stereotyping were a step back for women who were struggling to find their feet after having been oppressed by colonial rule and legislation. Manzini (2020) posits that after independence, women were identified as an oppressed group, and over the years, the Zimbabwean government has crafted legislation to redress the inequalities, and this has seen women occupying about 31% of parliament seats to date. Legislation such as the Legal Age Majority Act of 1992 enabled women in independent Zimbabwe to inherit their father's estates and become legal guardians of the family if the head of the family passed on. The Beijing Declaration of 1995 was a turning point in subverting preconceived notions of womanhood as it pushed forward the agenda of women's emancipation from patriarchal mindsets that did not value the complementary roles men and women played in society.

The post-independent era saw the rise of men in high government posts, with women taking less senior positions, such as secretaries. Others were not so lucky to get jobs, and the majority reverted to colonial gender roles of being wives and mothers. Ndhlovu and Wielenga (2021) point out how the Lancaster House discussion in 1979 addressed reparation for ex-freedom fighters, leaving out women and their participation in the liberation struggle and life in post-independent Zimbabwe. Religion made the women's suffering even worse, and it endorsed submissiveness as being part of a good Christian woman. Women who embraced motherhood and being part of the working class were shunned and negatively labelled. Berlant (2011) posits that such women were accused of being westernised and elite for straying far from social norms, which were a legacy from the colonial era that relegated women into the domestic sphere. This type of mindset, set in the post-colonial period, made women social outcasts, and it did not help that during the colonial era, men had been conditioned to think that women were beneath them in every sense of the word. Participant D has this to say, 'Although we fought alongside our man during the liberation struggle, men were quick to push us back to the

household chores after independence.’ This clearly shows that although during the crisis, men lean back for support from women, they easily revert to the default abusive mindset which was introduced and cultivated by the colonialists. This is why, like what Afrocentricity advocates for, it is very vital to look at African history and try in all earnest to put it at the centre of any African endeavour. Although in the post-colonial era in the Shona community, there is a spirited effort to embrace government policies like the gender equity policy, the colonial notions of women as household-bound are still prevalent.

The Advent of Covid-19: New Roles and Their Impact on Women's Social Lives

The advent of Covid-19 brought with it a lot of changes in terms of gender roles. COVID-19 was a wake-up call for many on how people are mortal and that disasters such as COVID-19 could wipe people into non-existence. The Covid-19 pandemic deepened gender inequalities in Zimbabwe, with women receiving the short end of the stick. Once again, women were drawn back to gender roles that were synonymous with the colonial era. They became caretakers of their families in charge of ensuring that the family remains safe. Reichelt, Makovi and Sargsyan (2020) argue that COVID-19 caused a shift in gender role attitudes within households as the division of labour in homes changed. Lockdown and stay-at-home orders by the government to contain the pandemic meant that men and women worked from home. Ahinkorah, Hagan, Ameyaw, Seidu and Schack (2021) point out that COVID-19 resulted in job losses, school closures, having to work remotely, and the need for social distancing, and this affected parents as they got saddled with more responsibility than before, more so women because they had increased domestic work and childcare duties compared to men. Participant A said, ‘During the pandemic, we were locked in our homes, and this gave us more work because everyone was in there, looking at you as the sole provider of physical and moral support when they were sick.’ This meant that women reverted to traditional roles of womanhood where household work, taking care of the husband and childcare were the order of the day. This is even though some of them were also working from home, just like their male counterparts. The online tasks from their workplaces were sometimes shelved for them to take care of their husband and children. The woman in the house had to make sure that the home was a COVID-19-safe zone, and containing the kids became a full-time job. Thus, making sure the family remained safe became the prerogative of the woman. This role remains significant in the contemporary Shona community, where they believe that women are strong and should always care for their husbands and children, even if they are part of the working class.

Covid-19 meant that women became primary caregivers. Ahinkorah et al. (2021) in their research found that customary roles added to women's burden as they had to care for the sick at home, including relatives, whilst men felt the impact less. Montgomery, Chidanyika, Chipato and Van Der Straten (2012) argue that the Zimbabwean culture stereotypes men as providers and women as nurturers. This explains why women got saddled with becoming impromptu nurses doing care work by taking care of sick families and relatives during COVID-19, whilst men assumed traditional roles where nurturing is not part of their forte. Lungumbu and Butterly (2020) point out how UN Women Deputy Executive Director Anita Bhatia expressed her anguish on how the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in women doing considerable domestic and family care work, which could offset gender equity efforts that had taken decades to make concrete. Her concerns thus emanate from the fear that such a scenario enables society to revert to gender stereotypes, which would be a huge disadvantage to women. The nursing role has also stuck to the women's gender since the COVID-19 era. Women are now expected to keep traditional and modern medicines in their houses to fight against any eventuality. Knowing traditional herbs and their functions has now become the prerogative of women.

OECD (2020) notes that women led in the polls in terms of the COVID-19 response rate and were nearly seventy per cent of the healthcare providers, which increased their vulnerability to catching COVID-19. This means that aside from working to provide for the family in partnership with their spouses, women also bore the brunt of doing unpaid domestic work. Power (2020) posits that a country's economy cannot function without the contribution of care workers who cook, raise children and provide home-based care, among other things. Such a sentiment ascribes to the Africana womanism point of view that men and women are equal and their different roles in society are complimentary different as they can be at times. Thus, ignoring the value of care work women contribute to the economy throws back gender role redress equity steps taken. Having to take on the role of providing care work at home and also remotely working from home is a bit too much for women, especially when men could chip in and complement their efforts.

Traditionally, the Shona people have always believed in the use of herbs to heal any type of ailment. Modern medicine only cropped up with the coming of the white men who believed that traditional medicine use was pagan. Some of the Shona people had been born again and no longer believed in African Traditional Religion but instead followed the religion of the white men, where the use of herbs and traditional medicine became a thing of the past. This mindset was challenged by the onslaught of Covid-19 when people in Zimbabwe were dying in their numbers every day. People resorted to mother nature to provide herbs such as *zumbani* (fever

bush) and *mufandichimuka* (resurrection bush), among many other herbs traditionally known to cure certain ailments. Women once again led from the front, going to hunt for herbs to fight COVID-19 and keep their families safe. Participant L said, “Since caring for the family is a woman’s supposed job, then it was only natural that hunting for herbs would also become a woman’s task.” Participant D has this to say, ‘Every morning I would go into the bushes to look for different herbs which were very vital for the suppression of Covid-19 related infections’. The men and children would then be in the comfort and safety of the house as the mother figure goes out in search of herbs. The women were exposed to contracting the virus as well as harassment by security officers who, in most cases, were using force to deter people from moving around during the lockdown. However, women had to endure both as this is a new gender role which has been endorsed on women by the virus. In the contemporary community, women now have to act as family herbalists. It was put under their jurisdiction to search for new herbal products on the social markets and bring them home to the family. The traditional healer role has now been crowned on the Shona women.

In the Shona society, just like many patriarchal African societies, men are the heads of households. A woman can only assume that elevated position if the male leader has passed on. If a woman’s husband dies, she becomes the head of the house. However, there would be a male relative assigned to look after the family. If no male figure is found, a woman from the male side of the family is assigned as the father figure. Traditionally, if a woman lost her husband, the late husband’s male relative, usually the brothers, took over their brother’s position as husband and head of the house. In Shona, they call it ‘*kugara nhaka*’. Such cultural practices were discouraged in Zimbabwe through legislation as they infringed on the rights of women. However, some people still practice this tradition. Rosenthal and Marshall (1987) posit that normally, the title head of the family is dominated by male members of a family, and their ascension to such an authoritative position does not require full agreement by all people. Participant G noted, “This means that women do not have control over who she has to relate with should their spouse pass on, and despite there being legislation to protect their rights, the woman is always forced to comply as she considers her children’s relationship with their paternal side of the family.”

Covid-19 gave rise to a lot of widows who were left with huge responsibilities of being both the father and the mother. Automatically, the woman became the head of the house despite the cultural undertones of her position in the family. Participant F has it that “During the COVID-19 pandemic, women become both the father figures as well as mothers of the family after the death of their husbands.” During this era, gathering was not allowed, and hence, there was no

room for traditional processes to be observed. The *kugara nhaka* (a practice where the family of a deceased member of the family is given a male patriarchal member who ceremonially acts as a father) system was defunct during this era, and one participant, Participant B, said, 'After the death of my husband we were not even allowed to distribute his clothes as in the Shona norm.' Thus, the women were saddled with more roles after the death of their husbands. They were expected to work and raise money for utilities as well as be role models for the children as far as good community conduct is concerned. There were no male relatives to help them raise the children, as well as standing in the gap of the departed father. The absence of the complimentary father figure entails that women are now supposed to work as mothers, fathers and, at the same time, company and government workers.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought profound changes to everyday life, reshaping how individuals navigate work, home, and family responsibilities. As the pandemic died down, many women in Masvingo found themselves juggling multiple roles simultaneously—professional duties, household tasks, and caretaking responsibilities. This convergence of roles often led to an unjust distribution of labour, where women bore the brunt of domestic duties. The study found out that even as both genders worked from home during the COVID-19 era, women consistently managed a larger share of household chores, caregiving and child-rearing activities, reinforcing traditional gender norms that had been challenged in previous decades. Post-pandemic, the lingering effects of this role overload became increasingly evident. Even as society began to reopen, the expectation for women to fulfil these multifaceted roles remained strong, as if the pandemic had recalibrated society's perception of gender responsibilities. It has been unravelled through participant observations that many women felt pressured to revert to pre-pandemic routines, experiencing guilt or failure if they sought to prioritise their careers over household management. This cycle not only perpetuated an imbalance but also threatened to restore constraining stereotypes that limit women's participation and growth in wider community settings. The challenge lies in breaking this cycle, as many women find themselves in a relentless loop of expectations, leaving little room for personal aspirations or ambitions.

Conclusion

The research underscores that, throughout history, Shona women have been revered as the backbone of the household. Traditionally, the community placed immense trust in their abilities, with women managing a vast array of household tasks that were pivotal to family life. However, the arrival of COVID-19 brought unprecedented challenges that disproportionately

impacted these women. As the pandemic unfolded, their responsibilities as mothers, wives, and, in some cases, breadwinners escalated dramatically. They were and still are not only tasked with implementing crucial preventive measures to safeguard their families and act as herbalists but also with caring for relatives who fell ill or were otherwise affected by the virus and other contemporary ailments.

In tragic instances where husbands succumbed to diseases, with the disappearance of *kugarwa nhaka* women found themselves shouldering even greater burdens, often becoming the sole providers in their families. This shift not only intensified their roles but also solidified the longstanding gender expectations within the community. Even as the immediate crisis of the pandemic has subsided, many of these additional responsibilities have persistently lingered, reinforcing the traditional gender dynamics that have deeply influenced the lives of Shona women.

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