

## **Resilience Impetus to Elderly Women's Livelihoods in Rural Zimbabwe: A Case of the Chivi District**

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### **Abstract**

The study took a qualitative approach with face-to-face in-depth interview and observation as the data-generation instruments. The research design was hermeneutic phenomenology in the form of a case study. This approach was chosen to allow for the in-depth exploration of the lived experiences and resilience of elderly rural women in the Chivi District of Zimbabwe. Eighteen elderly rural women were selected using snowball sampling and were interviewed in their immediate environments, which suggest a focus on their naturalistic daily living context. This inquiry was guided by the Afrocentric ideology and the Life Course Perspectives which illuminated the inquirers' understanding of these elderly rural women's life experiences in Chivi District. The Life Course Perspective was a complementary framework that helped to analyse how experiences and challenges accumulate over a person's lifetime. Indigenous African Knowledge Systems (IAKS) were found to be a crucial factor in the resilience of these women as they navigated daily challenges. These elderly rural women were not passive victims but active agents in improving their living conditions. It also emerged that, the traditional extended family is no longer a "safety net" for the elderly. The government's social protection policies are neither effective nor consistently enforced in alleviating the challenges faced by the elderly in rural Zimbabwe. The study recommends the government to improve social protection policies that target the elderly women; policies should provide social, economic, and psychological support to enhance their health and living conditions. Communities are urged to strengthen family support systems, making them more vibrant and comprehensive.

### **Indigenization statement**

The researchers were born and grew up in the Chivi District. The interviews were conducted in Muzvidziwa and Murevesi villages in the district, our home area. As Indigenous people, we interacted with the elderly as we were growing up until we relocated to Harare for employment; therefore, we had pre-existing relationships with them. For this research, we had a prolonged stay in the villages and the elderly women warmed up to us as they had realised we meant no harm. Hence, we built a strong relationship with the participants.



### Introduction

Zimbabwe has experienced a number of unprecedented economic, environmental, and political shocks and stresses, many of which had long lasting impacts on the livelihoods of elderly rural women. The chronological age for being labelled as 'old' varies from country to country, with the United Nations (UN) setting the recognised threshold at 60 years (Fateme, et al., 2024), whereas in Zimbabwe it is 65 years (Government of Zimbabwe, 2012). Locally, elderly women are referred to as '*Mbuya*' to show respect in the Karanga tradition. Usually there is no standard measure for one to be labelled as old except inferences from grey hair, a walking stick or having many grandchildren.

The study focused on how elderly women were resilient to life challenges such as poverty, marginalisation, and neglect in the Chivi Rural District. Resilience implies an ability to bounce back following a challenge or loss, a type of self-righting mechanism and is enhanced by resources that can be activated in times of stress (Gulbrandsen & Walsh, 2015). Hence, it intimates the ability to withstand pressure, endure hardships, thrive amidst problems, and resist the current.

The rural elderly showed expertise in Indigenous African Knowledge Systems (IAKSs) by gathering wares from the environment to sustain themselves and their dependants (Mwapaura, Mushunje, Charamba, Risinamhonzi & Simango, 2024). IAKSs comprise the knowledge local people gain over generations of living in a particular environment and they encompass agriculture, food processing, preservation, and traditional medicines such as herbs (Malapane et al., 2024; Mwapaura et al., 2024). The elderly rural women have shown how they have conquered hardships in rural Zimbabwe through utilising the richness of their environments in sustaining their livelihoods. These elderly rural women, therefore, have undergone historical and social experiences that were contextual to sustain their lives.



### Background

Projections from studies world-wide, Zimbabwe included, show that the population of the elderly is increasing and is expected to continue growing, with recent estimates showing an 80% rise, a significant increase compared to 30% in 2013 (United Nations (UN), 2024). The population of the elderly is not only on the increase but ageing in Africa, especially in Zimbabwe, is currently occurring against a background of immense economic and social hardships such as poverty (Makore & Al-Maiyah, 2021; Ncube & Nhapi, 2022). In addition, there is lack of comprehensive social protection policies such as social or public assistance that is non-contributory and funded from general taxation (Dhemba 2013; Government of South Africa, 2019). The absence of such a social or public assistance scheme, which provides financial benefits to persons of small earnings granted as a right in amounts sufficient to meet a minimum standard of need exacerbates the vulnerability of elderly populations (Dhemba & Dhemba, 2015; VNR, 2019).

Despite the high levels of need, the coverage of social protection interventions remains limited with about 50% of the extreme poor in Zimbabwe not benefiting from any of the social assistance programmes (Makore & Al-Maiyah 2021; United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2022). For example, during drought years the government introduced food-for-work programmes meant to alleviate poverty to indigent people. However, the food-for-work programmes (FFWPs) in Zimbabwe are not inclusive as they are influenced by capital labour relations on aging (Demba & Demba, 2015; Taruvinga & Simbarashe, 2015). Moreover, it is not clear how the elderly are expected to benefit from these initiatives. The elderly are considered to be disengaged from work activities, based on the belief that they naturally withdraw from social roles as they age (Saha & Zaman, 2020). Consequently, elderly women are excluded from some government programmes that are aimed at alleviating hunger, such as (FFWPs) (Dhemba, 2013; Dhemba & Dhemba, 2015). This exclusion persists



despite the fact that the elderly women are among the poorest who often do not benefit from social assistance, as highlighted by studies conducted by Dhemba and Dhemba (2015), and reiterated more recently by Chikoko, Mwapaura, Zvokuomba, & Chinyenze (2022) and Ncube & Murray (2024).

Furthermore, elderly rural women were considered dependent on the extended family fabric (Dhemba, 2013; Powell & Khan, 2014; Taruvinga & Simbarashe, 2015). However, modernisation, education, and industrialisation have led to changes within the traditional family support systems for older people (Ncube & Nhapi, 2022). The aforementioned authorities established that modern practices have weakened the cohesiveness of the extended family system, thereby undermining its capacity to provide social support and care to its members. Hence, this places the elderly, especially women, in a challenging position, as they are considered a burden and useless members of society (Abonor et al., 2024; Crampton, 2013; Eboye, 2015). The vulnerability of the elderly women is further exacerbated by the minimal or non-existent health care system in rural Zimbabwe (Bultmann et al., 2024; Dhemba & Dhemba, 2015; Makore & Al-Maiyah, 2021).

Although older adults face numerous challenges and losses, studies related to life satisfaction for older women and men suggest that they are satisfied with life despite the challenges and losses they experience (Fateme et al., 2024; Kinsel, 2005). The current study, therefore, foregrounds the view that the elderly women's mastery of the environment and their lived experiences of the IAKSs contribute to their capacity for resilience in the Chivi District of Zimbabwe.

### **Statement of the problem**

In Zimbabwe, the traditional extended family structure, which has historically served as the primary social safety net, is undergoing a profound metamorphosis. This



transformation is driven by a confluence of factors, including the increasing influence of Western cultural values and the pressures of modernisation, which have contributed to the fragmentation of family ties and the erosion of community support systems. These shifts have significantly weakened the family's capacity to provide adequate care and social support to its most vulnerable members, particularly elderly rural women. The elderly rural women, therefore, are progressively neglected, marginalised, and impoverished as their families and communities fold their hands and watch.

### ***Research Questions***

The major research question was: To what extent are elderly rural women in the Chivi District of Zimbabwe resilient to the challenges they confront in their communities?

This study also addressed the following research sub-questions:

1. What challenges are faced by the elderly rural women in Chivi District?
2. What strategies are employed by elderly rural women in Chivi District to combat social and economic constraints?

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study was informed by the Afrocentric ideology (Afrocentrism) and the life course perspective. Afrocentrism stresses the culture and achievements of Africans (Chiwane, 2016). Afrocentrism, therefore, is not isolationism but thinking and acting African, *id est*, African-centredness. The adoption of this ideology was central in exposing the resilience of rural elderly women in Zimbabwe in sustaining their livelihoods. It is the premise of Afrocentrism to show the centrality of ideas that are inherent in Africans as they interact with their environment. This interaction is enhanced by the IAKSs—knowledge that is unique and contextual to Africans in rural Zimbabwe. It is permissible, therefore, to argue that the



appreciation of IAKSs makes elderly rural women subjects and actors not passive objects in their environment and communities.

To understand more about the resilience of elderly rural women there is need to appreciate their lifelong experiences as they determine their social and economic status. This was the basis of the inclusion of the Life Course Perspective (LCP) as a complementary theory in this study. The central focus of LCP was on human development from birth to death—ontogeny (Alwin, 2012; Bultmann et al., 2024; Wingens et al., 2011). Hence, in this study of the resilience of elderly rural women, LCP was understood under the following themes: interplay of human lives and historical time, the timing of lives, linked or interdependent lives and human agency (George, 2003). Therefore, LCP elucidates the interconnectedness of social contexts, cultural meanings, social structural location, economic environment, and politics-ontogenetic development as related to the livelihoods of elderly rural women (Elder, 1994; George, 2003).

### **Review of Related Literature**

Globally, each country has its unique Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKSs) that are contextual and are passed through observation and oral experiences as alluded to earlier in the background of the study. There was a wealth of Indigenous Knowledge contained in Africa's cultural and ecological diversity (Malapane et al., 2024; Mwapaura et al., 2024). African people, especially the elderly rural women, have used this knowledge to solve specific problems such as hunger, poverty, and health issues (Malapane et al., 2024). Indigenous knowledge (IK) is local knowledge unique to a given culture that is acquired by local people through the accumulation of experiences and informal experiments (Mwapaura et al., 2024). IAKSs can be best described as community-based techniques for dealing with everyday challenges such as food production, medication, and income-generation.



Armed with IAKSs, elderly women in rural Zimbabwe are resourceful. They use the environment to their advantage in order to survive, showing human agency (Wingens et al., 2011). This has disputed the claim by other studies that elderly women's lives are deplorable and needed interventions as if they were passive entities (Nabalamba & Chikoko, 2011; Powell & Khan, 2014). Hence, it was proved that in rural Zimbabwe, the knowledge that was passed verbally from generation to generation is very valuable in the elderly rural women's lives.

### **Scope**

The study was confined to Chivi District in Masvingo Province. The district is patriarchal and is originally occupied by the Karanga people (Mazarire, 2003). Like most African people, the Karanga consider the extended family as a safety net (Dhemba & Dhemba, 2015; HelpAge International, 2013). The people in Chivi District mostly survive on subsistence and small-scale farming that augments household income (Chipamhura, 2008). The article focused on how some elderly rural women in Chivi District are resilient to social and economic hardships. Hence, the article sought to expose elderly women's resilience to life challenges using the IAKSs prowess to sustain their livelihoods and of those under their care. The analyses were centred on 18 participants.

### **Significance of the Study**

The challenges faced by elderly women were compounded by systemic neglect. Despite their critical role in Zimbabwean society, many find themselves in precarious situations due to a lack of formal support. While the government has a National Social Protection Policy Framework, its effectiveness is questionable. The framework, was last updated in 2016, and has not been tailored to adequately address the specific needs of elderly women, who are often overlooked in policy implementation. The absence of dedicated and



targeted social protection programs for this demographic group leaves them to navigate poverty, health issues, and social isolation with minimal institutional assistance. Therefore, this study aims to explore and document the survival strategies employed by elderly women in Zimbabwe amidst these challenging circumstances. By examining their resilience and the informal support networks they create, this research sought to shed light on their lived experiences and identify potential avenues for more effective policy interventions.

### **Research methodology**

#### **Research Design**

This study employed a hermeneutic phenomenological research design to understand the lived experiences of elderly women in the Chivi District. Phenomenology explores the lived experiences of individuals (Badil et al., 2023). This design was deemed ideal for this study as it allowed the researchers to delve deeper into the participants' subjective realities, revealing the meanings they attribute to their survival strategies during periods of drought and inflation. This design moved beyond a simple description to an interpretation of the elderly women's stories, aligning with the goal of understanding their resilience in a nuanced way.

This research design enabled the researchers to unearth and understand how the elderly women in the Chivi District manage to use the IAKSs for survival, during dire situations such as droughts and inflation (Yin, 2018). The interviews were conducted with eighteen elderly women and were designed to bring out the extent to which these elderly rural women were resilient to the challenges they confronted. During the interviews, researchers took notes, thereby capturing the details whilst the conversations were still vivid in their minds. The notes enabled them to refer to what had transpired during the interviews (Badil et al., 2023). The choice of methodology was influenced by the study's focus on unearthing the



multifaceted experiences and activities of rural elderly women in Chivi District, with the aim of gaining a deeper understanding of their resilience in sustaining their livelihoods.

### **Data-Generation Instruments**

Interviews and observations were used to collect data so as to answer the research questions as outlined earlier in the paper. As we interviewed and observed the participants in their homes, we jotted down notes for later reference. The interviews were conducted in vernacular and it helped elicit comprehensive information. The participants refused to be tape recorded in fear of victimisation as it was during the political campaigns of the Harmonised Elections of 2018 in Zimbabwe.

Through observations and in-depth interviews, researchers uncovered the factors that helped elderly women to be resilient to social and economic challenges. This enabled the researchers to expose how these elderly women in the Chivi District were marginalised and not targeted in government and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) interventions during hardships. HelpAge International (2023) discloses inequalities in society regarding the elderly especially women and challenges the status quo that tended to legitimise their (female) oppression and marginalisation.

### **Sample and Sampling Technique**

Researchers used the snowball type of sampling to identify cases of interest that were information-rich. This was prompted by the fact that there was no demographic data of elderly women in Chivi District. Furthermore, village heads had no information of elderly persons in their villages. Therefore, to identify them it was easier to be referred by other elderly women who knew their age mates. Hence, the researchers asked participants to identify others with the same characteristics as theirs to become members of the sample



(Dragan & Isaic-Manu, 2022; Palinkas et al., 2013). Researchers were able to interview 18 elderly women ranging from 65 years of age and above.

### **Ethical Issues**

The ethical considerations observed in this study revolve mainly around permission. Researchers sought permission to carry out the study from the Research Ethics Committee under the College of Human Sciences at the University of South Africa (UNISA). After receiving the Ethical Clearance letter, the inquirers personally took the letter and sought an audience with the District Administrator to obtain permission to conduct the study, as he was the overseer of Chivi district. Having been granted the permission by the District Administrator, the researchers went to the social welfare administrator and village heads respectively seeking permission to carry out the study in the villages. The researchers also informed the participants about their intentions to interview them on the subject under study, and the participants agreed without any reservations. Thereafter, the inquirers conducted their study freely. To ensure informed consent, inquirers told participants about the purpose of the study in detail as well as making them aware of their right to withdraw from the interviews prematurely without consequence. Inquirers made sure that the participants were free to make decisions about whether they wanted to participate or not at any point in the study. In other words, they needed to have informed consent (Naresh & Sunil, 2020). Informed consent is a process whereby participants give their consent to participate in a research study after getting honest information about its procedures, risks, and benefits (Hader et al., 2023; Yin, 2018). Inquirers also informed participants that pseudonyms were going to be used to conceal their identity. Therefore, names used in this article are not participants' real names. Throughout the interviews no single participant withdrew.



### **Data Presentation and Analysis**

In qualitative research, data analysis should not only happen at the end of the research study, it must be a continuous process (Hader et al., 2023). During observation and the interview, the researchers paid attention to minute detail, watched and listened carefully and then scrutinised the information gathered. Data analysis was done from the notes gathered during observation and interviews. While reading through the field notes, researchers developed concepts and then categorised them according to themes, (Thomas & Harden, 2008). In thematic analysis, every attempt was made to employ names for themes in a manner that directly reflected the text as a whole. The process of data gathering and data analysis continued by bringing in new participants until research questions were fully answered and no newer data was emerging from the participants, thus, data replication started to occur (Thomas & Harden, 2008). The development of new concepts occurred and consequently new knowledge was generated.

### **Findings and Discussion**

The basis of this discussion was informed by the insights brought by the theoretical frameworks of the study. The centrality of Africans, especially the elderly women in rural Zimbabwe, was distinct in the ways they confronted life. They have shown resilience to challenges that were inherent in life trajectories of women throughout their life. A sample of 18 elderly women in Chivi District showed resilience in sustaining their lives. The analysis was done under the following themes that came out from the data collected: (1) Challenges faced by elderly rural women in their communities in Zimbabwe; (2) Strategies employed by elderly women to combat economic constraints in rural areas in Zimbabwe.



**Challenges confronting the rural elderly women in their communities in Zimbabwe**

Social change is inevitable in the 21st century as structural developments are taking place even in rural areas. In Chivi District, the Growth Point (GP) was fast expanding and the villagers were affected, especially elderly women. These developments had negative effects on the welfare of the elderly women (research participants) in the vicinity.

***The Breakdown of the Extended Family Fabric***

Traditionally, the elderly lived among their kin in communal areas but these living arrangements have changed (Ncube & Nhapi, 2022). Family bonds were eroded over time. Discussions with the elderly women revealed the same:

The extended family is no longer viable. There is no longer a family connection or bond. Some generations have no connection to the rural home. Therefore, we are neglected by our own children or relatives. Most of our adult children live in towns and some migrated to neighbouring countries. (Shashara)

Another participant was quick to say,

You think people are still taking care of each other? (She said with shock registered all over her face). People are now very individualistic; no one cares what happens next door. It used to happen long ago, these days people are only worried about their nucleus families. This is because of the harsh economic situation. Everyone is living on the edge. There is high unemployment; all the youths are loitering in this village. How then will they be able to assist others? (Ruza)

The revelations point to the breakdown of traditional family ties in Chivi District brought about by Westernisation and urbanisation. This situation testifies that the mutual support between elderly persons and their adult children is affected by life events and transitions across the life course (Abonor et al., 2024; Ncube & Nhapi, 2022). According to the aforementioned authorities, the mutual support can also change when families go through historical disruptions as witnessed by current events globally due to climate change and the distressing economic meltdown in Zimbabwe. Therefore, it is erroneous to assume that the elderly get their safety nets from the extended family structures.



*The Exclusion of the Elderly from Social or Public Assistance*

Participants in this study were excluded from social protection policies such as the social or public assistance. This was established by the following excerpts from the participants; "If I had an allowance from the government I would have managed to buy food" (Tula). In the same line of thought another participant pointed out: "We do not get any money. Sometimes if we don't have money even for the grinding mill, we just boil the maize and eat it" (Ruza).

Tula and Ruza's exclusion from social assistance is detrimental to their existing poor living standards reflecting the interconnectedness of factors that impede the well-being of elderly women in rural Zimbabwe. Furthermore, it was noticeable that at most of the participants' homesteads there were no granaries or kraals, which are regarded as symbols of wealth by rural home standards, only small huts for basic shelter were visible at most of their homesteads, some of which were in an almost dilapidated state. This echoes the other findings that elderly women are often the poorest in many societies (Powell & Khan, 2014).

**Strategies Employed by the Participants to Combat Economic Constraints in Rural Zimbabwe**

Although the participants faced challenges, the study confirmed that certain elderly rural women were still actively engaged in socio-economic and cultural activities to sustain their lives and even their dependants' lives.

*The Economic Activities Done by Participants to Sustain Their Lives*

Some of the participants engaged in strenuous activities in order to sustain themselves economically.



I am now relying on catching and selling termites as well as selling firewood. If I sell a cup of termites I get US \$1, the more the cups, the more the money that I get to buy basic necessities. A wheelbarrow of firewood gives me \$5. (Goho)

Similarly, Tula lamented: "I sometimes join colleagues to catch some termites which I then sell to raise a bit of money." Besides selling such things as termites, some participants survived on gathering wild fruits for sale such as amarula nuts.

We are the poorest of the poor in this village. You see the amarula stones over there? We crush them to get the nuts (shomhwe) inside and then sell; for every cup we get a dollar. That's the money I use to buy a few basic commodities as well as for the grinding mill (Saru).

Termites and amarula nuts are seasonal and catching termites is not easy as they are collected from anthills using reeds which are inserted in holes. The catch depends on how the termites respond to the foreign body and their availability, meaning that to fill a cup may take considerable time. As the termites are removed from the reeds, they also fight their battle by biting their enemies' fingers in a bid to escape. Consequently, Mhere had rough fingers from the bites.

In addition, amarula stones have to be collected as they are not found at each homestead, for instance, at Saru's home there is no amarula tree. This means that she has to collect them from somewhere else and in some cases they could be far away and these Amarula fruits need to be dried first before they are crushed. The process is not easy, as the nuts are crushed between two stones by holding the amarula nut with one's fingers and then with a stone held by another hand it is crushed to remove the hard pod. A miss could result in injury as the crushing stone could land on one's finger(s). One particular participant had some injuries from this activity.

However, selling termites and amarula nuts could not be reliable sources of income. Saru's revelations portrayed the dire situation of some elderly women in Chivi District who relied on selling things that are hard to come by. In these dreadful situations, the participants in Chivi District were denied social assistance, thereby disregarding the call made by Goal



(1) of the Sustainable Development Goals that calls for the 'eradication of poverty and hunger in all its forms everywhere' UN (2015). Excluding elderly women from social assistance is a breach of human rights as they have high of need (UNICEF, 2022).

Although some of the participants have a difficult time sustaining themselves, it is also important to note that termites and amarula nuts are very rich in protein. The wares would enhance their health needs as the participants lived in an area with a high rate of food insecurity. In addition, selling beer serves as another source of income, demonstrating that the participants are resourceful and could adapt to situations, most prudent is the fact that they augment their scanty incomes. This is an indication that the participants are not passive members of society but are also a force to reckon.

Besides selling termites and amarula nuts, some participants indicated that they also engage in very difficult money-generating activities such as moulding bricks, usually done by the young due to its strenuous nature.

Poverty has taught me to do a number of things. At some point I was moulding bricks and selling to people with building projects in the Growth Point. I stopped this venture because of the drought – I could no longer get enough water. I also have health problems due to old age. (Tula)

The excerpts above reveal that the elderly have seen business opportunities at Chivi Growth Point (CGP), which is a business hub in the area for their wares.

In a similar situation, Rugare, a 74-year-old elderly woman whose body shook all the time with some kind of affliction, was lying under a tree shade whilst instructing one of her grandchildren who was brewing beer (*ndari*) to sell. Rugare was intending to go to the city for medication after selling the beer despite her affliction. In some cases, they instruct their grandchildren to do some of the chores such as brewing beer. Thus, they engage young ones in job training, thereby passing on IAKSs to young generations. The money they get from selling beer (*ndari*) is for sustenance and in some cases for paying hospitals bills or buying medication.



Thus, the elderly women are repositories of knowledge and the expert knowledge they possess proved to be useful as elderly women used their social world (epistemology) to ease their situations. The experiences of the elderly women in Chivi District have enhanced their resilience to challenges that they confront due to socio-economic constraints. The little income they get from the environment and other economic activities is used meaningfully to augment their meagre incomes. Usually the activities are done in groups; as human life is entrenched in social relationships with kin and friends across their life span (Elder, 1994). According to Elder (1994), social relationships provide social support that is much needed in later life. This implies that human life is typically embedded in social relationships in various social institutions (meso level) across the life course (Cooke & Gazso, 2009; Wingens et al., 2011).

#### ***Elderly Women's Participation in Food for Work Programmes (FFWPs)***

During drought years, people suffered from hunger, especially marginalised groups such as the elderly. During the calamities, the government usually provided food for work programmes (FFWPs) as interventions. The programmes were aimed at the youth and middle aged adults as the elderly were considered frail and weak. However, the study revealed that the elderly women who are heads of households defied the exemptions and joined FFWKs for survival.

We work every Thursday and get 50kg of maize every month. We do all kinds of jobs: from repairing the roads to repacking maize. We repack maize seed into 50kg that will be distributed to the people. (Chiduku)

Another participant reiterated that: "After working these days we are getting a bucket of sorghum, peas and cooking oil. This is really helping" (Ketai).

The study revealed that, although the elderly rural women are portrayed as frail and weak they are able to work and provide food for their households, a reflection of resilience.

Besides working in FFWKs programmes, these elderly rural women engage in other money



making activities that keep them afloat during hardships. They are involved in community or self-sustaining projects. Hence, one of them said,

I work very hard because if I don't do that my grandchild will not go to school. Sometimes I work at the school; they give us work to cover the US\$28 fees. When the going gets really tough, I sell my goats. I have to raise money for the upkeep of my household. (Chiduku)

Another participant had the following to say;

We have a money club with other women in the community. You contribute US\$10 every month and we are 20 in our club. We then loan each other the money to be paid back with an agreed interest. We share our money at the end of each year and we start again. This club has helped us a lot as it enables us to buy basic necessities as well as house hold utensils. In my case, this money goes a long way since I am a widow. (Sara)

Some of the participants had other initiatives as revealed below:

There are a number of projects going on. There is one called Fushayi within which I am member. We contributed US\$2 to start the project. This project is very helpful because you can borrow money from the project and pay back with a 20% interest. We also have a money club where we are 5 in each group and we give a member \$20 per month in rotation. This project assists us especially when your turn to get the money comes, you can afford to buy some little things you want. We also have a project called Chaya where we grow the Chaya vegetable from Zambia. This is a very good vegetable, rich in nutrients such as iron which is critical for pregnant women and vitamin A for eye sight. This vegetable is recommended for the elderly as well. There is also the Goat rearing project which was introduced by a NGO partnered with the Africa University. We joined this project for free (Rudo).

The above excerpts demonstrate that given the chance these elderly rural women are also capable of doing work; they embrace work under difficult circumstances in order to survive and fend for their families. Therefore, to exclude these elderly rural women from work activities whilst they starve is age discrimination. Instead work should be tailor-made to suit different ages as all people need to survive (Mapoma & Masaiti, 2012). Furthermore, these elderly rural women are proactive as they are many a time found to be initiators or participants in productive undertakings such as money lending projects and nutritional gardens.



### Conclusion

As emerged in the foregoing, the elderly women in rural Zimbabwe, specifically in Chivi District, face many challenges but they showed the emotional stamina for survival. The participants are engulfed in poverty and live in the lower echelons of society. The extended family networks were eroded by modernity leaving the elderly rural women isolated and marginalised. This was exacerbated by their exclusion from government interventions meant to cushion vulnerable groups such as social assistance. They live on meagre incomes from undignified activities that give them hope for continued existence. These elderly rural women's knowledge of their environment and cultural experiences proved to be very helpful in their daily lives. The IAKSs help in the initiatives for survival, for example gathering wild fruits to produce products for sale such as *shomwe* (amarula nuts). The Western notion that IAKSs are redundant had been proved wrong by the participants of this study. Instead, the elderly rural women proved to be repositories of knowledge as they possessed valuable information which they passed to young generations. The bottom line is that IAKSs are not a backward phenomenon as people would want to think because the livelihoods of some elderly rural women were buoyed by these IAKSs as embedded in Afrocentric philosophies.

The elderly rural women's poor living conditions were worsened by the national social protection policies that are age discriminatory. However, the non-existence of comprehensive safety nets does not deter these elderly women from exploring other avenues such as agriculture, money lending initiatives, and brewing beer for sale. In addition, these elderly rural women embrace work regardless of their age. They work side by side with the youth and middle aged adults for food provisions during drought years. This proved that the elderly rural women studied were resilient to life challenges and social change.



**Recommendations**

- (1) The Government of Zimbabwe could at policy level provide the elderly rural women with the social, physical, and psychological support to enhance their health and living conditions.
- (2) Through awareness campaigns and media platforms, communities could be urged to strengthen family support systems for the elderly rural women, making such systems more comprehensive and vibrant.
- (3) At policy level again, the government could introduce sustainable and empowering interventions that involve the elderly rural women in income-generating projects.
- (4) The government and NGOs could improve social protection policies to better address the suffering of the elderly rural women.



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