



# Social Work Practice: Accounting for Double Injustices Experienced by Women Under the Confluence of Covid-19 Pandemic and Climate Change Impacts in Nyanga, Zimbabwe

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## Abstract

In this paper, the researchers argue that the repercussions of the Coronavirus Disease 19 (COVID-19) pandemic are taking a toll on rural women, not as a new phenomenon, but as an amplifier for their historical calamities dovetailed by climate change. The declaration of COVID-19 as a global pandemic by the World Health Organisation ignited widespread pronouncements of national state of disasters in various countries around the globe including Zimbabwe. Subsequently, like other countries, Zimbabwe followed the precautionary measures outlined by the WHO and pronounced its national lockdown to curtail the transmission of the virus. This paper intends to demonstrate how convergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change impacts serves as a double injustice for rural women in Nyanga communities, Zimbabwe. The study was qualitative in nature guided by the descriptive research design. Twenty participants comprising rural women and social workers were selected using purposive and convenience sampling techniques. Data were collected using focus group discussions and key informant interviews. The Thematic Content Analysis was followed to analyse the data from which the findings were derived. This study established that the COVID-19 pandemic is enhancing the catastrophic implications created by climate change on rural women whose food security systems are shattered, livelihood strategies maimed, caregiving roles burgeoning, and access to healthcare systems compromised. This daunting double impact is aggravated by gender inequalities, social exclusion and patriarchal dominance. The centrality of social justice to social work connotes that the profession has a tendentious responsibility to stand in the gap and liberate women from the jaws of these double catastrophes (climate change and COVID-19).

**Keywords** Social work · Injustices · Women · Climate change · COVID-19 · Nyanga

## Introduction

Zimbabwe is amongst the countries plagued by the coronavirus disease, commonly known as COVID-19. As of 28 February 2021, the country had recorded 36,321 cumulative cases with 33,919 recoveries and 1489 deaths (Mbulayi et al. 2021). Notwithstanding the slower number of reported

cases owing to the country's poor health and emergency preparedness and unavailability of COVID-19 diagnostic test kits for broad-based testing, the government pronounced a national lockdown on 30 April 2020 (Ndoma 2020). In light of this, Mhlanga and Ndlovu (2020) opine that the purpose of the lockdown was to flatten the transmission curve and to prepare the country's health systems for possible management of the anticipated scourge of the disease. As such, the initial pronounced nationwide lockdown spanned for 21 days which was later extended by 14 days and thereafter with an indefinite extension (Anna and Mutsaka 2020).

Dzobo et al. (2020) denote that the lockdown measures prescribed citizens to be confined to their homes, only leaving to procure basic commodities including medications or as essential workers. On the same note, businesses, schools and borders were closed (Muronzi 2020). Also, social gatherings of more than 50 people were prohibited

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(Mutizwa 2020). Consequently, street vendors and other informal sector workers where women are predominant lost clientele base, workspace and supplies. What this means is that livelihoods employed to withstand the historical impacts of climate change were disrupted (Kudejira 2020; Nyahunda et al. 2020). As articulated, just like climate change, the wrath of the COVID-19 pandemic is ravaging the poor rural and urban populations who depend on meagre resources and precarious livelihoods where women are predominant (Ndoma 2020). Similarly, Mhlanga and Ndlovu (2020) aver that the concomitant lockdown measures were decreed without a stimulus relief package and safety nets guaranteed to insulate the poor and unemployed by the government. Inversely, the measures were harmful to most rural women who lack the means to leap back after lockdown disruptions adding to the calamities posed by climate change.

To extrapolate from the above, Anna and Mutsaka (2020) quoted the Zimbabwe Gender Commission lamenting that the lockdown has a boomerang effect on women who are dominant in the agricultural and informal sectors. Notably, gender equality has not been infused in the national response strategies to the pandemic. From this, it is cardinal to note that issues of gender insensitivity of interventions, differential gendered impacts and exclusion of women form the hallmark of arguments in the climate change discourse where its impacts are encumbering rural women than men in Nyanga community, Zimbabwe. This paper explores the analogous social impacts of the two disasters to women that ultimately serve as a double injustice.

### Climate Change and Covid-19 Impacts on Women

In the climate discourse, protection policy areas tend to be male-dominated, and women are underrepresented in areas of climate change policy frameworks and their needs remain unmet (UN Women 2015; IPCC 2015; Nyahunda et al. 2019). Similarly, policies and public health modalities have not addressed the gendered impacts of disease outbreaks and the response to COVID-19 poses no difference. As such, national and global COVID-19 policies are marred by underrepresentation of women. The voices, expertise and experience of women are not being fully incorporated into global health security surveillance, detection and prevention mechanisms (Peterman et al. 2020; WHO 2020). Climate change impacts created extra burden on women and girls where they devote most of their time securing scarce resources such as water and firewood thereby limiting their chances to embark on other income generating activities like men (Baten and Khan 2010; Ndaruzaniye 2013). In the same terrain, the eruption of the COVID-19 pandemic connotes that gender inequalities shall increase for women because of their caregiving roles where they stand high chances of

infection when looking for scarce resources like water, food and firewood (Sabao and Chikara 2020). As undergirded in the latter, Peterman et al. (2020) denote that in other previous health emergencies such as the Ebola and Zika viruses in West and East Africa, women's unpaid work increased exponentially where discriminatory gender norms restricted them from scouting for economic opportunities.

In the foregoing, McKinney and Fulkerson (2015) posit that the burden of water and firewood collection owing to climate change devastations of the natural resource base compel women and girls to walk for long distances which in most cases expose them to violence and sexual harassment. WHO (2020) made similar projections that, due to COVID-19, women and girls have to walk for long distances for water and firewood collection for household use which exposes them to the risk of infection and gender-based violence (Teti et al. 2020). The most daunting impact of climate change on women is food insecurity owing to recurrent episodes of drought emanating from failed harvests (FAO 2011; IPCC 2015). Further, UN Women (2015) avowed that when confronted by food shortages, the caregiving responsibilities of women see them prioritizing feeding children and the sick first. With no changes to that effect, Kapata et al. (2020) aver that due to COVID-19, women bear the brunt of food insecurity and social norms dictate that they eat last which may subject them to malnutrition more than men and stand a high chance of infection. Lastly, Rahman (2013) observed that during climate change disasters like floods, women's healthcare needs are neglected because of inequalities in accessing healthcare services and diminished nutritional systems. On the same wavelength, Roesch et al. (2020) infer that COVID-19 is likely to perpetuate gender and health inequalities due to differential vulnerability to infection, exposure to pathogens, treatment received, and provision of women's sexual and reproductive needs.

### Social Work, Social Justice and Women Issues

From the above section, there is an undisputed confluence between climate change and COVID-pandemic impacts on women more than men and this serves as a double injustice. As such, social workers have been historically involved in the promotion of human rights and the advancement of women's issues (Boetto 2018; Dominelli 2013; Nyahunda 2021). In light of this, Alston (2015) defines social justice as a process where there is equal distribution of benefits and burdens to all members of society. As for Tischler (2011), social justice stimulates the desire for social workers to address the disparities that characterize much of human needs when confronted with disasters such as climate change and COVID-19 (Bedford et al. 2020). In that regard, Garbarino (2017) opines that social workers are

obligated to promote social justice, especially for vulnerable groups who are underrepresented, oppressed and discriminated. Towards this end, the negative impacts of COVID-19 on the social welfare of individuals and communities and the unequal share of the impacts on women more than men make COVID-19 and climate change a threat to social justice (Ataguba 2020).

To add on, COVID-19 and climate change are social justice issues because they disproportionately affect marginalized groups (women) and they harm the social and psychosocial functioning of individuals and communities (Cluver et al. 2020). Based on this, Achstatter (2014) avowed that social workers should occupy a strong position on climate change initiatives focusing on elimination of all injustices emanating from climate change dimensions. In the same vein, during health emergencies (COVID-19) and climate change disasters, social workers should serve as a voice for those who are trapped under unpleasant circumstances when their jobs or homes and neighbourhoods are threatened through disaster or disruptions (Bedford et al. 2020; Nyahunda et al. 2019). Lastly, McMichael (2012) posits that a social work approach should transcend to rural communities and unravel the essentiality of incorporating women's voices in decision-making activities and initiatives that concerns them. At this juncture, the researchers argue that social workers can prevent the exploitation of women as labourers under both circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change.

### Theoretical Framework

The Social Vulnerability Theory guided this study. According to Teti et al. (2020), COVID-19 is not only a medical pandemic but also a social ill disrupting social order and its impacts are distributed along with social constructs where women are more disadvantaged because of the low social status they occupy in society. In tandem with this, the Social Vulnerability Theory defines social vulnerability as the degree to which a person's social situation leaves them susceptible to problems, hazards or disasters (Fatemi et al. 2017). Similarly, Tupie and Viser (2013) posit that vulnerability is socially attributed; hence, it is essential that when making vulnerability assessments, the focus should be given on inequalities that hamper the ability of women to adapt to climate change/COVID-19 (Ataguba 2020). In the foregoing, the theory underpins that social vulnerability is an interplay of limited access to power, resources, structures, skills, low income, lack of disaster/endemic preparedness, and risky livelihoods (Wolfson and Manes 2012). This paper argues that the Social Vulnerability Theory is one of the predominant frameworks in climate change discussions and its proponents ubiquitously fit in describing the status of women in the face of COVID-19 ramifications.

To add on, the theory is premised on the belief that vulnerability differs by gender, educational levels, age, location and income levels (Muttarak and Lutz 2014). In light of this, women continue to be disproportionately impacted by poverty, more than men, because of their different societal standpoints (UN Women 2015). Bradshaw (2013) weighs in by denoting that, the social status of women that plunges them to vulnerability during disasters or health emergencies is aggravated by gratuitous gender inequalities hinged on patriarchal dominance. On the same note, women have distinct vulnerabilities, and this informs their differential abilities in experiencing and recovering from disasters (Bankoff et al. 2013). To extrapolate from the proponents of this theory, women in Zimbabwe's rural communities are mostly trapped under the conditions which make them vulnerable to climatic shocks, health emergencies (COVID-19), poverty, social exclusion, patriarchal dominance in decision making, limited access to information, lack of land and property rights, and ascribed gender roles.

### Research Approach

In this study, the researchers utilized the qualitative research approach for two reasons as mentioned by Teti et al. (2020); firstly, qualitative enquiries are the best in capturing social responses to the emerging COVID-19 pandemic. Secondly, qualitative methods are essential in comprehending pandemics like COVID-19, its impacts on people and responsive strategies in play. Earlier et al. (2019) allude that when embarking on qualitative research, researchers are interested in establishing and learning about people's experiences and how they interact with their social worlds and the meanings they derive out of such interactions. The descriptive design was followed to describe how the convergence of climate change and COVID-19 impacts disproportionately encumber rural women in Nyanga communities. The use of the descriptive design provides an elucidation of salient details of a situation be it in a social settings or relationships (Denzin and Lincoln 2011). This study sought to solicit information from rural women in Nyanga whose livelihoods are affected by both climate change and COVID-19. The study intended to establish how the outbreak of COVID-19 in the middle of a climate crisis is serving as a double injustice for women. Also, it gathered information from social workers who are involved in addressing the challenges faced by rural people in the wake of disasters.

It is important to note that this study was conducted when the Zimbabwe was on a nationwide lockdown. What should be noted is that the study was feasible because Zimbabwe's lockdown restrictions prohibited social gatherings of more than 50 people (Dzobo et al. 2020; Mutizwa 2020). The health and safety of the participants was promoted

during the discussions with community members because the researchers adhered to the WHO guidelines of temperature scan, hand sanitising, wearing of face masks and maintenance of a 2-m seating distance. Furthermore, during the interviews with social workers, the organisations where the social workers were drawn had health precautionary measures in place according to the operational standards set by the government. This made the conducting of interviews in the offices of these social workers feasible. The criteria used to select the participants are explained below.

### Sampling Methods

Purposive and convenience sampling techniques were followed to select the participants of this study. On this note, purposive sampling allows the selection of participants according to the needs of the study aimed at clearly bringing out the phenomena under study (Rubin and Babbie 2012). Further, Newman and Hitchcock (2011) state that in purposive sampling, the study population is selected based on the nature of research aims, its elements and the researcher's knowledge to hand-pick certain members of the population based on their characteristics, such as in-depth knowledge of the issue. In light of this, purposive sampling was used to select two villages in Nyanga rural District, namely Nyamahumba and Nyamakanga. Also, purposive sampling was followed to select social workers who served as key informants. These were selected based on the presumption that they were involved in addressing the challenges faced by the communities during disasters. Also, the study in question about social injustices stemming from climate change and COVID-19 fall within the purview of the social work professional mandate (Dominelli, 2018). Therefore, the knowledge base of social workers in promoting social justice qualified them as key informants.

On the other hand, convenience sampling was used to select rural women. Babbie and Mouton (2012) view convenience sampling as the selection of easily accessible participants to the researcher. It is a least rigorous technique, and it is less costly in terms of money, effort and time (Rubin and Babbie 2012). In using the convenience sampling, the researcher only selects those who are convenient to him/her (Newman and Hitchcock 2011). In light of this, the convenience sampling technique was followed to select women in Nyamakanga and Nyamahumba villages who were available and ready to participate in the study. Since the study was conducted during lockdown, there was limited movement of people; hence, only those available were selected for the purpose of the study. The presumption by the researchers was that most women are subsistence farmers dealing with climate change impacts; thereby, they

are intuitively impacted by COVID-19 ramifications. Following the mentioned sampling techniques, 20 participants were gathered, 13 were rural women and seven were social workers who served as key informants. These social workers were drawn from two Non-Governmental Organisations and two Civil Society Organisations operating in Nyanga communities.

### Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected using focus group discussions and key informant interviews. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were held with community members in observation of the COVID-19 meeting regulations. In this regard, two focus group discussions were conducted in the two selected villages (Nyamakanga and Nyamahumba). In Nyamahumba, the meeting had seven participants while in Nyamakanga, the meeting had six participants. These meetings were held at community's meeting points that is, at open spaces. Each focus group meeting had the duration of 1 hour per village. Key informant interviews were held with social workers. The interviews were conducted in the social workers' offices at different organisations in observation of the health guidelines outlined by the WHO. In this regard, seven key informant interviews were held with different social workers. Each interview lasted for 25 minutes. Furthermore, Shona was the medium of communication and the data were transcribed back to English for the information to be easily comprehended by the audience of this study. The Thematic Content Analysis (TCA) was followed to analyse the data from which the findings were derived. The TCA refers to a set of techniques used to analyse textual data and elucidate themes (Crowe et al. 2015). In this regard, the researchers followed the thematic analysis stages outlined by Vaismoradi and Snelgrove (2019), namely data transcription, selection of transcripts, compilation of themes and sub-themes list, categorisation of themes, re-coding of data and writing up of the report. This assisted the researchers to develop themes that would underpin the impacts of both climate change and COVID-19 on rural women in Nyanga.

### Ethical Considerations

Permission to conduct the study was issued by the traditional leaders and organisations where participants were drawn. Participants were requested to sign consent forms pledging their voluntary participation in the study. Ethical issues of confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed.

## Findings and Discussion

### Disrupted Livelihoods and Economic Insecurity

This study established that the livelihoods fostered by rural women to withstand the impacts of climate change were disrupted by the outbreak of the COVID-pandemic and lockdown restrictions. The pronouncement of nationwide lockdown plunged rural women in Nyanga into economic insecurities. Prior to the eruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, rural women in Nyamahumba and Nyamakanga communities were embarking on a plethora of livelihood activities as post adaptation mechanisms to compensate for losses from agriculture owing to climate change and to diversify their income streams. In light of this, Chambers and Conway (1992) define livelihoods as activities, assets and capabilities used as means of living. Common livelihood activities involve petty trading, selling of fruits and farm produces, casual labour, poultry production and cross border trading. The following narrations confirm this:

“... I no longer have any other survival strategy, we used to survive on vending where I sell tomatoes. I am a widow and we have nowhere to sell our products because we are locked up...” (FGD, Nyamahumba).

“... COVID-19 disrupted my projects. My poultry project involves going out and market my products and now everything is stuck with no transport and reduced clientele base. We were surviving from hand to mouth ... (FGD, Nyamakanga).

“... All our income streams are dried now. We acknowledge that the lockdown measures are meant to protect us but they should assist us with means of survival...” (FGD, Nyamahumba)

This validates earlier studies that revealed that climate change is a threat to human life and their livelihoods (Chazovachii 2012; Gukurume 2013; Nyahunda and Tirivangasi 2020). What emerged in this study is that COVID-19 has not only disrupted and shut down women’s livelihoods, but it has plunged them into serious economic quagmires because agriculture and petty trading, which are their major sources of income, are no longer executable owing to the outbreak of COVID-19. From this, the researchers argue that this is serving as a double injustice for women who have been reeling with climate change impacts and lack means to leap back from its conundrums. This gives credence to Leach (2020) who opines that in countries with weak social protection systems, pandemics (COVID-19) and disasters (climate change) have a differential impact on women because of their susceptible economic activities (agriculture and informal trading) compounded by low socio-economic status.

### Poverty and Food Insecurity

It emerged in this study that the outbreak of COVID-19 in the middle of climate change-induced catastrophes, such as recurring episodes of drought in Nyanga communities, increased women’s poverty levels thereby making them further food insecure. Climate change is causing traditional food sources to be unpredictable and inaccessible for women in Nyanga communities. Inadvertently, the outbreak of COVID-19 and the pronouncement of the lockdown measures that restricted rural people’s survival tactics worsened the situation. This is confirmed by the following narrations:

“...We did not receive enough harvests and life is getting difficult day by day because of Covid-19...” (FGD, Nyamahumba).

“...We are not receiving any help from the government. It’s very painful that there is no relief for the elderly. We just sleep not knowing where our next meal is coming from...” (FGD, Nyamakanga).

“...Our food preference has changed even our eating patterns. We no longer have means of getting money and we don’t know what to do next. It’s better to die of corona than of hunger...” (FGD, Nyamakanga)

An avalanche of literature on climate change corroborates the fact that women constitute an absolute majority of the world’s poorest population living in poverty, and this warrants their perennial vulnerability to climate change and food insecurity. This is because of social ascribed gender roles on food production and provision that confine women to household responsibilities (Ndaruzaniye 2013; Babungura 2013; Tupie and Viser 2013; Otzelberger 2014; UN Women 2015; FAO 2011; IPCC 2015; Nyahunda et al. 2020). Similar findings were reported by Mhlanga and Ndlovu (2020) that in Zimbabwe 73.3% of the population are living in the doldrums of poverty, the majority of whom are women, and COVID-19 renders them further food insecure and vulnerable. The effects of food insecurity and poverty are further aggravated by climate change (FAO 2011; UN Women 2015). The majority of the participants lamented that the cost of living is becoming unbearable with food prices spiking up amidst stagnant economic endeavours owing to the COVID-19 induced lockdown. Sadly, the same way women are not able to afford farming inputs and pesticides to cushion their crops in the wake of climate change (Angula & Menjono, 2014) is the same way they cannot afford to buy the disinfectants, face masks and sanitizers in the fight against COVID-19 (Bradbury-Jones and Isham 2020). Kudejira (2020) avowed that the shutdown of markets contributed to the skyrocketing of basic prices exacerbating the existing vulnerabilities of women, the elderly and people with disabilities.

## Domestic Violence

This study established that pandemics such as COVID-19 provide no exception to the scourge of domestic violence against women. It emerged that financial stress, hunger, frustrations and spending much time together amongst couples brew domestic violence incidences in Nyanga communities where women were victims. The following narrations confirm this:

“...Couples are now spending most of their time together because of the lockdown and this is causing a lot of friction and misunderstanding...” (FGD, Nyamakanga)

“...The noise in most households is emanating from lack of food and conflict on where to get money. Women are at the receiving end of abuse because of this...” (FGD, Nyamahumba)

“...There is too much violence in the households because of the pain caused by covid-19. Men are steaming out their frustrations on women...” (FGD, Nyamakanga)

The above narrations give credence to the findings by WHO (2020) that the disruption of social protective networks and decreased access to services have exacerbated the risk of violence against women. Sabao and Chikara (2020) made similar observations that as families spend more time in a close contact, stress emanating from economic or job losses exposed women to the dramatic increase of violence. Literature on several climate change studies share congruent expositions that during and after climate change induced disasters, women fall victim to domestic violence including rape and transactional sex (Azad et al. 2013; Rhaman 2013; Bradshaw and Bulletin 2015; Gaard 2015; Yadav and Lal 2018). Similar projections were made by WHO (2020) in the genesis phase of the COVID-19 pandemic that women are likely to experience increased risks of gender-based violence, including sexual exploitation. In the same wavelength, the Zimbabwe Gender Commission was quoted by Anna and Mutsaka (2020) lamenting that domestic violence cases had ballooned by more than 100 percent during the COVID-19 induced lockdown ranging from emotional, physical and verbal to psychological abuse. In the climate change discourse, similar catastrophes of increased violence against women were reported (Rahman 2013; IPCC 2015). As articulated, during climate change-induced floods which plagued Zimbabwe recently such as Cyclone Idai (Chimanimani) and Tokwe Mukosi (Masvingo) disasters, reports of violence against women increasing in the refugee camps from their male counterparts or strangers were seen (Chatiza 2019; Hove 2016). From this, we argue that climate change disasters and health pandemics serve as a double injustice for women because they are disproportionately encumbered than men.

## Increased Care Work

It emerged in this study that the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic meant increased unpaid care work for rural women in Nyanga communities. The lockdown which decreed the closure of schools and other sectors amplified the caregiving responsibilities of women for children, the elderly and their male counterparts. What should also be underscored is that the outbreak of COVID-19 doubled the roles of women in scouting for scarce resources such as water, food and firewood. These resources are scarce owing to climate change and the gendered responsibilities of women make them bear the brunt of the burden. The following statements capture this:

“... We are faced with a serious water challenge because boreholes are no longer functioning. It’s a strange phenomenon here in Nyanga that I have to wake up in the odd hours of the day in these freezing temperatures. The rivers are dry because people are forever cutting down trees...” (FGD, Nyamahumba)

“...The burden has increased, and our male counterparts are not helping us. They keep on piling more work on us and you would think that they are about to say bath us as well. Men should go to work and kids to school for the burden to be easy...” (FGD, Nyamakanga)

“...Our male counterparts must help us. Women should do work that is line with their physical strengths, we are over strained. Men have become another burden, for we were no used to spending with them at home...” (FGD, Nyamahumba)

The IPCC (2012) postulated that climate change will result in additional workload for women/girls than men/boys, as it is women/girls who devote more time to securing scarce resources. This is because women play care provision roles to other household members especially children, the elderly and the sick who are dependent on them (Babungura 2013). From the above narrations, similar observations were made by Roesch et al. (2020) that women bear the brunt of increased care work during the COVID-19 pandemic. Bedford et al. (2020) add that the closure of schools exacerbates the unpaid care burden and stress on women. To add on, the safety of women is at risk as they rise early or stay late at water points and queue for water (Peterman et al. 2020). To extrapolate from this, in the face of climate change women are found to be working longer hours than men where they end up being drained physically and emotionally (Babungura 2013). The care responsibilities shouldered by women on children, the sick and the elderly extended to healthcare burden of their dependents because getting assistance at the clinics had become a challenge. It emerged that they were requested to produce test results for COVID-19 as a requirement to be attended at the clinics and hospitals or being turned

back home as their focus was on COVID patients. This is despite the exorbitant prices charged to get assisted at private clinics. From this, the researchers argue that most unpaid care work carried by women in Nyanga communities in the wake of climate change impacts and COVID-19 are directed towards care provision and hunting of scarce resources as compared to their male counterparts who seem to have more leisure time.

### Access to Healthcare Services

This study found the reproduction of similar catastrophes experienced by women before the outbreak of COVID-19. These include inadequate access to healthcare services. It emerged that women were struggling to access free contraceptives from clinics and hospitals owing to the COVID-19 lockdown. The majority of the participants lamented that their health needs were no longer a priority at healthcare facilities and alternative means to get such services demanded them to pay hefty costs pegged in foreign currency. The following narrations capture this:

“...Young women are struggling to access contraceptives, and this is leading to unwanted pregnancies. Most businesses are taking advantage of the lockdown and charge crazy prices for such in US Dollars in the time where Zimbabwe’s inflation has escalated...” (FGD, Nyamakanga)

“...It’s now difficult to get assistance at local clinics because they are only attending to serious ailments. Access to free contraceptives is no longer a priority to the health care officials unless if you buy at the pharmacies and they are expensive...” (FGD, Nyamahumba)

“...Some of us have defaulted on our medication for chronic diseases because access to health care facilities is now a challenge...” (FGD, Nyamakanga)

The above narrations give credence to the observations made by Kapata, Ihekweazu and Morga (2020) that the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to limit women’s access to vital sexual and reproductive health services. In the same wavelength, Mhlanga and Ndlovu (2020) aver that the decreased household income in the face of COVID-19 is serving as a barrier for women and girls in accessing sanitary and hygiene materials. Several studies on climate change and its related disasters such as floods bear evidence that women’s health affairs are often neglected and compromised by disasters caused climate change (Ndaruzaniye 2013; Rahman 2013; WHO 2020; IPCC 2015). Additionally, as pointed out by UN Women (2015), the differential sexual and reproductive needs of women are often disregarded during climate change induced emergencies. In most cases, this contributes to increased infection with STIs and unwanted pregnancies (Debnath 2015). To situate this as a double

injustice for women, studies in the climate change discourse revealed that the webs of poverty crippling rural women in Africa make them unable to meet the medical costs during times of family illnesses and health hazards emanating from climate change/COVID-19 (Shiva and Mies 2014; UN Women 2015; WHO 2020). From this, the researchers argue that the convergence of climate change and COVID-19 impacts on the health of women is aggravated by their social status which make them vulnerable than men.

### Abuse From State Security Officers

Women in this study lamented the inhumane treatment from the state security officers charged with the responsibility of enforcing the lockdown regulations. The daunting fact that the government of Zimbabwe pronounced a lockdown without safety relief measures for the rural poor saw many people defying the lockdown measures to fulfil their survival tactics. This is because the majority of rural people in Nyanga, as elsewhere in Zimbabwe, are in the informal sector such as vending, hawking and cross-border trading. These activities were suspended when the government announced the lockdown (Nyoka 2020). The majority of participants lamented the diabolic treatment by the state security personnel which included assault and brutality as women try to make ends meet amidst the lockdown restrictions. The following narrations confirm this:

“...We are being brutalized by the soldiers and police officers. I know we are defying the lockdown regulations, but hunger and poverty is the pushing factor...” (FGD, Nyamahumba)

“...Soldiers are not treating us with respect. They run after the elderly like something else forgetting that they are our offspring. We are stampeding for commodities like sugar and mealie meal and it’s very difficult to practice social distancing...” (FGD, Nyamakanga)

“...Soldiers are harassing us and we are not happy. Women are not being spared from the wrath of brutality...” (FGD, Nyamahumba)

Reports of abuse from state security personnel during disasters are not a new phenomenon in Zimbabwe. From this, Hove (2016) contends that during climate change-induced disasters which hit the Tokwe Mukosi area in Masvingo Province in 2016, reports of abuse of women by state security officials at the Chingwizi refugee camp, emerging especially during the distribution of relief services, were seen. Similarly, what emerged in this study reflects analogous experiences with soldiers and police officers who were deployed to enforce the COVID-19 lockdown measures. A study conducted in Darfur region of West Sudan revealed that women faced gender-based violence from the soldiers as they scout for scarce recourses

like water and firewood owing to climate change (Baten and Khan 2010). In similar scenarios, this study established that some male soldiers were soliciting for sexual acquiescence from women in exchange of granting permission to sell their wares amidst COVID-19 lockdown restrictions. Sadly, other state security officials were soliciting for bribes to permit women to pass through lockdown-induced roadblocks and trading restrictions. WHO (2020) projected that during the COVID-19 pandemic, women are likely to experience gender-based violence and sexual exploitation. Reasoning from this, the researchers opine that all these experiences by women are grave human rights violations compounded by their low social status and vulnerability which is different from men. Thus, the convergence of climate change and COVID-19 impacts serves as a double injustice for women and a requirement for social work intervention.

### Role of Social Work Practice

In response to the challenges bedeviling women under the convergence of climate change and COVID-19 impacts, the researchers documented interventions from social workers and views on how the profession intends to address the plights of women in Nyanga communities and beyond. The common theme that dominated the discussion was on how the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting women in the wake of climate change impacts. The researchers were keen to establish the role of social workers in addressing the discrepancies caused by both climate change and COVID-19 on women. In light of this, all key informants acknowledged that climate change is the new normal in rural communities and women are reeling with its impacts and the eruption of COVID-19 has simply doubled rural women's problems. A significant proportion of key informants captured most challenges which were submitted during focus group discussions with women. Key informants corroborated that in the wake of COVID-19, domestic violence trebled, child marriages increased, as well as a burgeoning of suicide cases, spiking of crime rates, and widening of poverty and food insecurity. In the foregoing, social workers submitted that as primary caregivers, women ran the risk of contracting COVID-19 and patriarchal systems confine them in non-paying jobs where they end up at unsafe places in search of scarce resources owing to climate change. The following narrations capture the gist of this study that the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic are not a new phenomenon for rural women:

“...I doubt COVID-19 has brought anything new but it has just increased issues that women were already suffering from...” (Interview, Social worker)

“... Most issues faced by women in the climate change discourse are now compounded by COVID-19...” (Interview, Social worker)

“...These crises namely climate change and COVID-19 erupt in non-transforming patriarchal societies and women suffer a double blow...” (Interview, Social worker)

The above statements validate the observations by Tosepu et al. (2020) that COVID-19 has the potential to amplify the historical social ills such as climate change, poverty, unemployment and crime. In light of this, key informants provided a catalogue of their interventions in their areas of operation and where improvements should be made in addressing the double injustice experienced by women in the wake of COVID-19 and climate change. The role of the social work practice is captured as follows:

### Gender-Sensitive Policy Development and Implementation

A significant proportion of participants castigated the gender passiveness of the Zimbabwean government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. A special reference was made to the lockdown policy instrument, SI83 of 2020 Public Health (COVID-19 Prevention, Containment and Treatment) (National Shutdown) Order, 2020, which is silent on how the needs of the vulnerable groups can be prioritised. Towards this end, most key informants proposed that a modest way of intervention by the social work practice is through advocacy and lobbying for gender-sensitive policy development where the differential needs of women and other vulnerable groups are addressed. The following narration confirms this;

“...We are making efforts to ensure that response mechanisms to disasters are sensitive to the plights of women...” (Interview, Social worker)

In the foregoing, most key informants denoted that they strive to see policy design and implementation that is a product of robust consultations with vulnerable groups where response to their needs is guaranteed. It emerged that constitutional guarantees such as the right to social protection, health and food are not being fully enjoyed during the lockdown. As such, women were rendered more vulnerable because of COVID-19. In light of this, Nhamo (2017) opined that policy development guarantees how people's needs can be met. Sadly, Zimbabwe lacks a substantive Gender-Based Violence strategy during pandemics and other emergencies.

Arguably, Nyahunda et al. (2019) averred that in Zimbabwe, climate change gender-sensitive strategies are in place but devoid of implementation. As articulated earlier, gender-sensitive policy development and implementation



during disasters are fundamental for checks and balances of interventions (Dominelli 2013). In response, the researchers argue that in the wake of climate change and COVID-19, social workers should champion the development of policy frameworks within the province of social work practice. This is important to account for their interventions. Currently, there are no policies and programs designed by social workers for climate change interventions (Boetto 2019) and the same can be said with regards to health emergencies such as COVID-19. Lastly, interventions informed by policies or programmes that are gender-responsive would make a broad-based impact in addressing the anomalies in the existing interventions especially in rural communities.

### Psychosocial Support and Social Assistance

Social workers acknowledged that psycho-social problems affecting individuals are emanating from climate-induced shocks and the eruption of COVID-19 has the potential to worsen the situation. That being the case, the social workers submitted that they are supporting individuals and families to ensure that their needs are addressed. The following narration confirms this:

“...Every disaster has footprints of psychosocial distress and the already vulnerable (women) are the hardest hit. We have a professional mandate that COVID-19 doesn't ravage the psychosocial wellbeing of our clients ...” (Interview, Social worker)

Social workers denoted that they stand to deal with psychosocial distress for victims of mental health shocks owing to the combined repercussions of COVID-19 and climate change. To add on, social workers submitted that they are assisting some families with food parcels, mobilising resources to cater to sexual and reproductive needs of women, counselling services, dissemination of COVID-19 information and importance of gender equality in all spheres. Welfare promised from the government never materialised, and social protection systems are non-existent, social workers pledged to be at the forefront in recognising and engaging women and ensure that their practical needs are addressed. This is confirmed by the following statement.

“...We are prioritising the material needs of these communities because we understand that COVID-19 is affecting them a lot. Remember these communities were already food insecure owing to climate change...” (Interview, Social worker)

The key informants acknowledged that it is critical for social workers to support women out of vulnerability and this process should take into consideration the different categories of women with varied identities (Kemp & Palinkas, 2015). Inversely, the key informants lamented that women are compromising their own health and well-being to ensure that their families

are attended to. Accordingly, the researchers argue that social work intervention should transcend beyond meeting the material needs of women in emergencies, rather it should empower and liberate women from vicious patriarchal systems which subject them to automatic vulnerability when disasters strike.

### Promotion of Human Rights and Social Justice

Historically, social workers have been involved in advancement and promotion of human rights (Ife 2012). As such, social workers are well-situated to reduce inequalities against women by initiating activities where most of the women participate (Gray and Coates 2015). In this study, the researchers argue that climate change and COVID-19 are social justice and human rights issues because they disproportionately impact vulnerable groups. In support of this, one key informant mentioned the following:

“...Social workers by definition are human rights workers and social justice advocates. For that reason, they help individuals realise their rights every day...” (Interview, Social worker)

In light of the reported human rights infringement perpetrated by men in the households or by the state security officers, it was submitted that social workers can highlight and redress human rights infringements. Clark (2013) concurs with this by alluding that social workers need to put into cognizance the essentiality of human rights and social justice in their negotiation of policies designed for climate change and COVID-19-related interventions (WHO 2020). Key informants further submitted that social workers could help ensure that the pandemic is managed in a manner that promotes human rights and social justice. As such, all calamities faced by women with other social problems (climate change) need to be redressed by social workers and possible remedies provided. Most social workers denoted that they are making frantic efforts in challenging anti-oppressive practices by ensuring that rural women are given a voice in the challenges they are confronted with. This is confirmed by the following statement.

“... We are bound to ensure that human rights issues are respected at all costs. Of course, women are highly vulnerable, and their rights are trembled upon during emergencies, but we are standing in the gap...” (Interview, Social worker)

As already articulated, the social work profession is premised on honouring the fundamental worth and dignity of every human being and strives to promote social structures anchored on equity and equality (Boetto 2019). In the same wavelength, Alston (2015) opined that social workers play a pivotal role in bringing social justice issues and human rights to the frontlines of climate change debate, environmental catastrophes and

global challenges. Though social work intervention in climate change in Zimbabwe, the outlined roles can be emulated in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Conclusion

This study established that the eruption of the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the historical overburdening of rural women who are already reeling with climate change impacts. The findings of this study resonate with the proponents of the Social Vulnerability Theory which firmly believe that the impact of disasters/pandemics are distributed along social constructs where women who occupy low social status in communities are more vulnerable than men. On the same note, the theory underpins that the rampant gender inequalities determine who is vulnerable when disasters strike and this validates the findings of this study where gender ascribed roles confine women to caregiving responsibilities, where they scout for scarce resources owing to climate change thereby exposing them to the risk of infection with COVID-19. The challenges faced by rural women in the wake of climate change and COVID-19 is a threat to social justice because of the disproportional impacts dovetailed by the two calamities. That being the case, the tragedies of women encapsulated in this paper is a requirement for social work intervention as a helping, human rights, social justice and empowerment profession.

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