

Women, power and land in Zimbabwe

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"If women want property, then they should not get married."

Robert Mugabe, President of Zimbabwe 1980-2017

The redistribution of Zimbabwe's land during the Fast Track Land Reform Process (FTLRP), initiated by President Robert Mugabe in 2000, was the forcible appropriation of land which had been the property of white settlers since the late 19th century (Southall 2011, 83). In many respects, the FTLRP constituted a revolution as it entailed a considerable shift in the economic and political landscape of Zimbabwe.

Following the political independence of Zimbabwe in 1980, economically, many of the colonial structures remained intact. Between 1890 and 1980, under colonial rule, millions of black Zimbabwean farmers were forcibly evicted from their land. By 1914, 23, 730 white settlers had attained more than 19 million acres of land (Mutasa 2018). McFadden asserts that it is those who retain control of a state's resources who are able to further regulate the capitalist system in their favour (McFadden 2007, 38).

This notion can similarly be applied to all types of power relations, including those which relate to gender roles. The patriarchal assumptions which surround land ownership have reconstituted an arena in which women are not viewed as being entitled to property. The FTLRP was frequently framed within the context of a "metaphoric reclamation of [...] manhood and masculinity" (McFadden 2007, 40). FTLRP's leader, Robert Mugabe, stated, "if women want property, then they should not get married." (Goebel 2005, 145) The entrenchment of patriarchal assumptions into the FTLRP has prevented it from acting as a facilitator of inclusive notions of citizenship in Zimbabwean law.

Women have long constituted the majority of farmers in Zimbabwe. In 1994, 61% of farmers in Zimbabwe were female (Mgugu and Chimonyo 2004, 151). This is a trend which has solidified an individual and societal affinity between many rural women and the land they work on (Mutopo 2014, 199). However, this role has, in the past, often only been viewed in relation to the husband or family. During the colonial period, for example, it was concluded that male workers must be "stabilized" through the maintenance of a family unit. A "domestic government" was thereby enforced in order to support the work of men (Mgugu and Chimonyo 2004, 149). Zimbabwe's independence in 1980 followed a colonial presence which significantly undercut Zimbabwean agriculture. As a result, during the 1980s and 90s, female farmers were often unable to support themselves or their families "without remittances from husbands working in waged work" (Goebel 2005, 152). The resulting subservience of women to patriarchal institutions prevented many women from gaining full independence.

The FTLRP period may also be understood as a complete reconceptualization of the norms associated to land ownership. For women in Zimbabwe, who have often been marginalized with regard to the propriety of land, Amina Mama maintains that an "understanding of rights and entitlement" emerged and, with it, an ability to question these notions (Salo 2001, 60). As a result, various groups organised themselves, including the Women and Land Lobby Group (WLLG) of 1998, which sought to unite a power base for the improvement of women's formal rights to land (Goebel 2005, 145). Indeed, a shift may be observed with 18 per cent of small-holder farms being passed on to women during the FTLRP while only 5 per cent of land-reform farms were passed on to women in the 1980s (Manjengwa, Hanlon and Smart 2013, 9). This rhetoric of individual rights has also impacted the legal system in Zimbabwe as a number of divorced women have contested their husband's right to retain all of the land following separation in several high-profile cases (Marunda 2014).

However, the reality is that the government's 'fast track' process continues to privilege male landowners. This is partially the result of outdated legislation which does not "prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex" (Goebel 2005, 158). For example, women's names are often not included on

permits as there is “no legal requirement for this” (Scoones 2017). The Legal Age of Majority Act of 1982, which provided women's equality rights, was disregarded by the Supreme Court in 1999, when it was decided that many of these laws may be overturned if they contradict "customary laws" (Goebel 2005, 158). Therefore, a mind-set remains prevalent in Zimbabwe's judiciary system as traditional notions of ownership continue to exist.

The responses of Zimbabwean women to the FTLRP follow two primary schools of thought. The first group have sought to ensure individual economic advancement by reinforcing traditional modes of accessing female enrichment. These include pursuing a "negotiated relationship with the state and certain patriarchal institutions" (McFadden 2007, 40) and "gaining access to land and other resources in the context of the marriage contract" (Scoones 2017). The second group take a more radical feminist stance. These 'feminists' believe that it is equally as important for legislature to reflect women's land rights as it is for individual women to receive land. They seek an institutional change (McFadden 2007, 40).

The FTLRP demonstrated the extent of the divisions which remain pervasive amongst Zimbabwe's populace, both along racial and gender lines, following decades of colonial injustice. The FTLRP process puts many of these assumptions into question. However, it also inherited a legacy of patriarchal systems of land ownership and, as a result, it remains a gendered phenomenon.

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