

Ireen Mudeka and Thando Gwinji

# Feminism and the Informal Sector:

*Exploring ways to promote gender equity in Zimbabwe's informal economy*





Ireen Mudeka and Thando Gwinji

# Feminism and the Informal Sector:

*Exploring ways to promote gender equity in  
Zimbabwe's informal economy*

# Abstract

This discussion argues that feminist engagement with the informal economy must centre the lived realities of women informal workers, particularly street vendors, who are often excluded from the mainstream gender and economic policy agendas. Drawing from a wide range of knowledge sources, including feminist literature, policy, media discourse, and

crucially, the testimonies of women informal workers themselves, the paper challenges structural inequalities and calls for transformative strategies that recognize informal workers as central actors in the fight for economic justice. Such strategies highlight pathways for more inclusive and grounded feminist approaches.

# Introduction



Zimbabwe's economy is heavily reliant on agriculture and natural resources, yet, constrained by high unemployment. As a result, the informal sector constitutes a vital source of employment and livelihoods for millions of Zimbabweans today. Street vending is a dominant subsection of the informal sector, with women making up over two-thirds of its participants. While this statistical dominance may be interpreted as reflecting women's equality in the informal sector, the persistence of women's marginalization in street vending suggests otherwise. Although feminists have invested time in ensuring women's rights, there is a disconnect between the concerns of female street vendors and feminist work.

Nevertheless, feminism as an ideology affirms the right of every woman to gender justice and equity. Based on this understanding, we explore how feminists and female street vendors can collaborate to develop strategies that promote gender equity in the informal economy enabling women to live and work with dignity. First, we explore women street vendors' experiences with gender inequity and the strategies they use to overcome the resulting challenges. This helps us establish how these experiences can inform feminist strategies to promote gender equity in the sector. Based on the perspectives of female street vendors, we consider how feminists can rethink their engagement to advance gender equity in the informal economy.

## The connection between feminism and feminist engagement

Since the focus of this dialogue is feminist engagement, it is important to first understand the meanings of feminism and feminist engagement to differentiate between them. Magezis (1996) defines feminism as "a broad social movement that encompasses various perspectives advocating for women's rights." However, other scholars view feminism as an ideology, theory, philosophy, or way of thinking that aims to transform oppressive relations between men and women based on women's perspective. Feminism is the framework and ideology, while feminist engagement is how we implement and advance it in

practical and political ways. Feminist engagement is the movement, work, or action that feminists take to eradicate oppressive relations. The women's movement in Zimbabwe from 1980 to the present reflects feminist engagement; that is, acting on feminist values and convictions to bring about change. Thus, feminist engagement moves beyond abstract convictions by driving action for meaningful social change. This paper therefore locates vendor's struggles within feminist engagement.

## Women street vendors experiences of gender inequity in urban Zimbabwe

In urban Zimbabwe, women constitute a two-thirds majority of street vendors,<sup>i</sup> yet they remain vulnerable to gender injustices in this subsection of the informal sector. While men also face hardships, Zimbabwean women have always been more susceptible to such inequities.<sup>ii</sup> The extent of their vulnerability is reflected in their overrepresentation in less lucrative trades, their meagre incomes, and their lack of access to credit, proper vending infrastructure, and personal safety, given their exposure to various forms of violence.

Women's overrepresentation in less lucrative trades dates back to the 1980s<sup>iii</sup>. They generally have been confined to low end ventures such as selling clothes and perishable food retailing. In contrast, more men deal in high income products, including electrical appliances. Due to long existing patriarchal structures, many women in Harare stated that they are not 'allowed' by males to sell goods that are higher in hierarchy, for example, groceries and technology gadgets<sup>iv</sup>. Interviews in Harare revealed that some men do all they can to keep women out of lucrative "male trades", from approaching customers to down bidding or speaking negatively against female competitors. Men have consequently earned higher incomes, for instance, 300 to 1200 USD a month between 2014 and 2023, while women earned a monthly average of US\$100 and below after subtracting all costs<sup>v</sup>. This was below the December 2016 ZIMSTATS National Poverty Datum Line (PDL) for a family of five, pegged at US\$475 and the same applies today.

The confinement of women to low-value trades is linked to a lack of access to credit, since they do not meet the criteria for loans from formal or informal financial institutions. A Harare-based spice vendor explained, “I never contemplate seeking a loan from any bank. I don’t own a house or cattle on a plot of land. So, I cannot ask any bank for a loan”. In Gweru, women stated that lenders of ‘chimbado’ (individuals who give loans on exorbitant interest rates)<sup>vi</sup> readily accept male clients with tangible assets such as tools, bicycles, cars, houses or household property. Usually, women do not qualify because they do not own such property.

Time poverty also contributes to the impoverished status of women street vendors. Time poverty is a state in which there is always more to do than time available. It occurs when one is overwhelmed by responsibilities to the extent that there is no time left for self-care and rest. Time poverty is a gendered issue which mostly affects women<sup>vii</sup>. In urban Zimbabwe, women spend a disproportionately large amount of time on unpaid domestic work and work on the streets. In Bulawayo, vendors emphasise that they are literally raising their children on the streets, as they must impart good values to their children and assist with school assignments while they work. In Harare, most women - except the elderly - come to the market between 10 am and midday, after attending to household chores. Men arrive between 6:30 am and 7 am, taking advantage of the early-morning busyness as people go to work. While men remain in the market until 8 pm, most women leave by 7 pm to prepare supper for their families and complete other tasks during the night, such as doing laundry. Some fresh produce vendors must complete domestic chores at night because, as vendors in both Bulawayo and Harare testified, they wake up at 4 am on restocking days to purchase supplies. This creates time

poverty, contributing to poor business performance, consistently low incomes, and poor well-being.

Essentially, women face different challenges than men when it comes to street vending. For instance, when faced with raids, men respond swiftly by running off with their goods, unencumbered by childcare or pregnancy. They also resist arrest and the seizure or extortion of their goods. An OECD/ ILO 2019<sup>viii</sup> report confirmed that the inability to access childcare upon delivery confines female vendors to the so-called ‘flexible’ sections of street vending, which offer lower pay and a higher risk of accidents. While there is no readily available record of fatal consequences associated with male vendors, there are various accounts of fatalities among female vendors during raids. For example, during a raid in Harare in December 2023, police chased a vendor carrying a baby on her back and goods in her hands. The child fell and was crushed by a municipal car<sup>ix</sup>. A similar incident occurred in Masvingo Central Business District (CBD) in 2014, when a female street vendor fled the police with her baby on her back. She collapsed, but instead of offering her assistance, the police seized her goods and left. The woman later died<sup>x</sup>.

The above example also shows that women experience the challenges of street vending in different ways. In Harare, hearing impaired, the elderly, pregnant women and mothers with babies or toddlers are the most vulnerable. Mothers’ attention is divided between their customers, their children and avoiding the police. Women between 58 and 65 find it hard to carry heavy loads and run through traffic during raids. In Harare, it is even harder for people with hearing and speech impairments because their eyes are also their ears. They use their eyes to attend to their babies, communicate with customers, while watching out for the police.

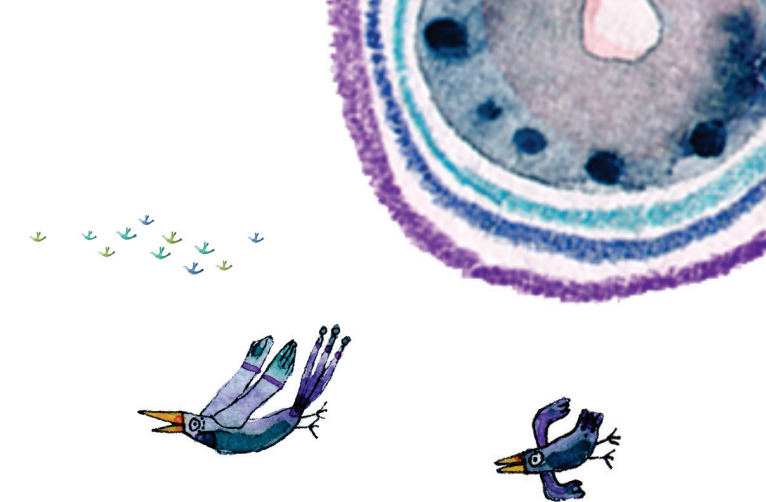


Theft of stock and extortion are also issues that reflect gender injustices affecting street vendors. In Bulawayo, for example, some men target women, offering them 'protection' from the authorities in exchange for money. As one vendor testified, "Some men come early in the morning, demanding ZAR5 per vendor, claiming they can prevent the municipal police from chasing us<sup>xi</sup>. "Police officers also steal confiscated goods. One vendor said, "Sometimes they take sealed sacks of stock, but when we pay the fines and collect them, they are half-empty". In Plumtree, officers illegally collect ZAR10 a day from female traders. This prompted members of parliament (MPs) to introduce a motion regarding the plight of female street vendors<sup>xii</sup>. MPs stressed that police officers target women's money and goods for their own use, leaving desperate vendors with no source of income.

Amidst all this, female street vendors face gender-based violence (GBV) in the workplace. Such violence is reflected in the term 'pahasha' (battle ground), which is used by single, married, young and elderly women to describe their workspaces. The Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP) and municipal police disrupt peaceful business through incessant raids. According to reports by the Swedish Development Forum (FUF) and New Zimbabwe, officers in Harare and Masvingo CBDs have injured women by chasing them through traffic, and by beating and shoving them to the ground during arrests. Officers also take cash bribes or demand sex from women seeking to avoid arrest and the confiscation of their goods<sup>xiii</sup>. This causes stress and reduces women's earnings. When money for bribes is unavailable, sextortion becomes the order of the day.

These cases of sexual harassment and sextortion most acutely reflect the gender inequities characterising street vending. In Bulawayo, women revealed that they are also sexually harassed by transport rank marshals and kombi conductors who operate near their vending spaces. Barons who hoard vending bays also demand sex in exchange for vending spaces. In Harare, interviewees concurred that, given the lack of toilets in undesignated vending spaces, women must use the same alleyways used by male vendors. Hence, males frequently walk in on women as they relieve themselves. Female vendors in Harare explained that "We face a real danger of rape from the homeless and fellow male vendors in the alleyways where we urinate."

They even profess love just because they have seen you urinating, and when you refuse them, they insult you with vulgar language." Police officers also touch female vendors' breasts and backsides under the pretext of searching for airtime vouchers to confiscate<sup>xiv</sup>. In what we term 'sextortion', they demand sex from female street

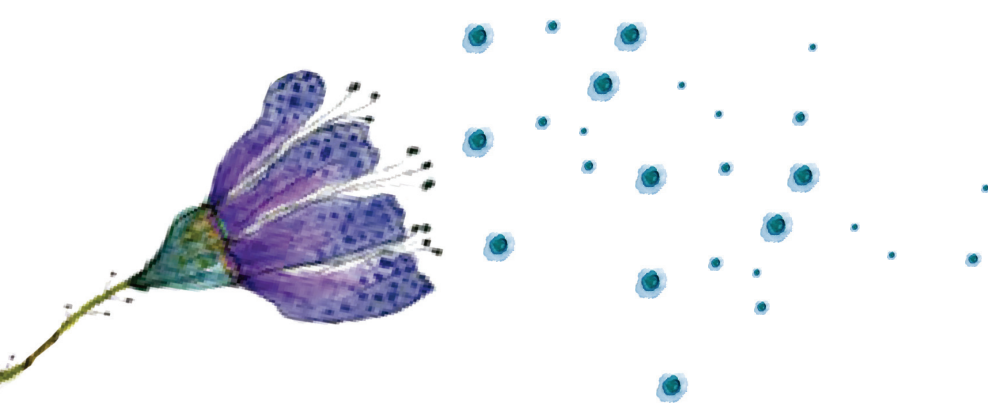


vendors in exchange for protection from arrest or the confiscation of their goods. Maria, a 36-year-old woman, fell victim to such demands from municipal officers in Harare<sup>xv</sup>. Indeed, this has always been a problem affecting female vendors specifically, dating back to the 1990s<sup>xvi</sup>.

In urban areas of Zimbabwe, sextortion primarily affects younger street vendors, mostly aged between 18 and 48. Transparency International Zimbabwe (TIZ) revealed in its report that over 57% of women in the informal sector have experienced sextortion as the primary non-monetary bribe demanded by officials<sup>xvii</sup>. While female street vendors are particularly vulnerable due to the informal nature of their work, sextortion generally affects poor women who are forced to provide sexual favours in exchange for employment, medical care, educational placements or good grades. Sextortion is directly linked to the agenda of the fourth wave of feminism, so this is an issue that feminists must address to improve the conditions of street vendors. The gendered power dynamics involved in sextortion are downplayed by referring to it as "sexual corruption". This term masks the vile form of gender-based violence that emanates from deeply entrenched patriarchal structures which normalise the exploitation of vulnerable women, such as street vendors. For these women, 'sextortion' is about 'coercion and lack of real choice'<sup>xviii</sup>.

## Women's strategies to survive on the harsh streets

Female street vendors adopt various strategies to minimise their vulnerability. To avoid losing their goods and money, they hide them in 'runner's' shops and under parked vehicles. They also create the illusion that they are carrying babies by carrying their wares on their backs. They display their goods on a cloth with pull strings, which they quickly pull to form a bag for their goods and run. Other vendors, such as those selling skin-bleaching creams, display empty containers to avoid losing their stock during random raids. Many bribe the police, a practice known as 'kudhiza' in Harare, to avoid arrest and confiscation of goods. Elderly women exaggerate their age, while in Harare, the hearing-impaired and speech-impaired feign confusion and helplessness and make confusing gestures to weaken the police's resolve to arrest them<sup>xix</sup>.



To address the issue of limited access to credit amid low incomes, female street vendors organise themselves into self-help clubs. Some contribute money to a communal fund each day and then share it at the end of each week or month. Others give a set amount of money to a specific woman on a specific day, in rotation. In the latter case, a group of ten women can give USD\$2 to one woman on a given day, meaning she takes home twenty dollars from the club. Women may contribute between 1 and 5\$USD per day. They use the money to replace stock seized by the police or to bribe them. Others use it to buy pots and pans, or to invest in larger ventures such as importing. These women stay away from the police's direct attacks by becoming the runners.

Women also join unions and organisations such as the Bulawayo Vendors and Traders Association (BVTA), the Zimbabwe Chamber of Informal Economy Associations (ZCIEA) and the Emthonjeni Women's Forum. These organisations provide a platform for engagement with local authorities and facilitate skills development, including financial literacy, as well as policy interventions. While vendors' associations are trying to ensure an easier business environment through revising bylaws at the local government level, the Women's Forum draws attention to gender-based violence (GBV).

### The resonances between feminist work and women street vendors concerns

In our efforts to understand how feminists can promote gender equity and, consequently, equality in the informal sector, we deemed it essential to identify areas of connection between their work and the concerns of female street vendors. Since the 1980s, feminists have made significant progress in terms of the adoption of a legislative framework for gender equity and equality in Zimbabwe. These included the Sex Disqualification Act of 1980, which allowed women to hold public office; the Legal Age of Majority Act of 1982, which abolished a patriarchal system that had held women in perpetual minority status; the 1985 Labour Relations Act, which addressed equal pay for equal work and maternity leave; and new inheritance laws, which recognised females' right to inherit from husbands and fathers. Key feminist organisations that advocated for these rights included the Women's Action Group, the Musasa Project, the Women and

AIDS Support Network, the Zimbabwe Women's Resource Centre and Network, and the Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe (WCoZ)\*\*. In the 1990s, the country recognised GBV, particularly domestic violence, as a violation of women's rights and, consequently, human rights. The Domestic Violence Act (DVA) was passed in 2007 following years of advocacy by feminists. By this time, feminists had already begun a vigorous campaign for a gender-just constitution. Their aim was to ensure that any new constitution would nullify Section 23C of the Lancaster House Constitution, which discriminated against women based on cultural and traditional practices. In 2013, feminists achieved significant progress when the most progressive constitution was adopted, enshrining women's rights.

For us, such gains show that to some extent, feminist principles and engagement align well with the need for gender justice and equity among female street vendors. Their achievements relate to every woman's rights regardless of age, religion, ethnicity, ability, race, class or occupation. As feminist informants argue, "our struggles were for every woman." Street vendors also require economic justice, political, social freedoms and freedoms from violence. They deserve bodily autonomy and integrity among other principles which guide our work..." A Harare spice vendor concurred with the above statement, stating: 'If feminists had not been working on our behalf all along, we would still be in rural areas today. Yes, I see now that we can work here and educate our children because feminists fought for this. If the troubles we face today are also what feminists are standing against, then we are one.' A Bulawayo vendor also said that "if feminism is defined as the fight for economic and other freedoms for women; if women's right to work and earn money even in the streets is what feminists are fighting for, then vendors live and breathe feminism every day." Another Bulawayo interviewee recalled that, "When feminists marched against the harassment of women by kombi touts at taxi ranks; they also fought against our daily harassment at those ranks..." Indeed, the work of organisations such as the Women's Action Group (WAG) and the Msasa Project is about ensuring that every woman is free from violence. To us, this includes violence against female street vendors by state or municipal officers. This feminist victory is reflected in Section 56 of the 2013 Constitution, which holds the government responsible for passing and enforcing laws that protect women from violence. We also see such victories as addressing street vendors' concerns about personal security, including violence from male

vendors, the homeless and municipal and ZRP officers. As one feminist informant confirmed, “When we called for legislation to address GBV issues, which are also enshrined in the 2013 Constitution, we were advocating for the principles of bodily integrity and autonomy. Every woman, including street vendors, should be free from all forms of violence and coercion. This includes the right to decide whether to have sex and to consent to being touched. Therefore, the concerns of female street vendors, including the sexual violations they face, align with what we feminists stand for.

Such explanations are compelling. We therefore agree that, although the term ‘street vendors’ may not have appeared explicitly in feminist work until now, some of the gains attained are related to the struggles of female street vendors to date.

The same applies to feminist demands for women to have the right to decent work and income (‘equal work for equal pay’). Some street vendors in Gweru agreed that the feminist call for women to enjoy the same dignity at work and decent incomes as men resonates with their own desire for decent incomes. Veteran feminists argue that this resonance is stronger than ever today, as formal employment becomes scarcer and women’s street vending is increasingly recognised as work. As such, feminist work already caters for this right. We also argue that the achievements of feminists, such as the Legal Age of Majority Act, enable female street vendors to work and enjoy freedom of mobility. Indeed, some Harare-based feminists regard this view as “indisputably capturing how our work aligns with the concerns of female street vendors”. “These are working women who should enjoy the labour rights that we fought for.” However, we must not lose sight of the significant dissonances between the realities and perceptions of feminist work and those of street vendors.

### Tracing the dissonances: from feminists to women’s street vendors

In order for feminists and street vendors to jointly develop approaches that promote gender equity and, consequently, equality in the informal sector, a deep understanding of the differences between their work and the reality experienced by street vendors is fundamental. While feminist gains are largely at the legal level, there is a gap between law and practice for street vendors. Furthermore, legislative measures are not informed by the diversity of women’s experiences and needs. Therefore, just as laws may not intentionally cover women in the economic periphery, such

as street vending, some key feminist principles, such as self-care, may not resonate with the realities of street vendors.

The violence suffered by female street vendors highlights the ongoing disconnections between feminist anti-GBV achievements and the realities faced by street vendors. Without detracting from their efforts, feminists must recognise that if female street vendors are still experiencing various forms of GBV, their need for freedom from violence has not been practically addressed. The legislative gains made since the 1980s concern general legislation that can only be realised by those who understand the laws and can demand the rights they confer. Without this power, female street vendors continue to face violence, and consequently, they cannot enjoy the gender justice necessary to claim equality of participation or access to opportunities in the informal sector alongside their male counterparts. Nor can they enjoy the personal freedom, bodily integrity and autonomy that gender justice and equity confer.

The same can be said of feminist demands for economic rights, as enshrined in legal instruments such as the 1985 Labour Relations Act, which emphasises decent work and wages, equal pay for equal work, and maternity leave for all women, and ultimately, the 2013 Constitution. However, female street vendors still occupy less lucrative trades and cannot enjoy decent wages. Feminist victories do not address the vendors’ lack of access to the funds needed to venture into high-value trades, which are dominated by men. They are hindered by the highly deterrent criteria for qualifying for loans from both banks and informal lending schemes. The Women’s Economic Bank, which was open in 2020 with the aim of promoting economic gender equity, has high collateral demands which exclude poor women such as street vendors, rendering it an elite facility.

Interviews and observations also revealed that street vendors are unable to reap the same benefits from maternity leave as middle-class working women. This may be because the feminist struggles that brought about such benefits never directly addressed the unique experiences of street vendors. As with the right to work and equal pay, the right to maternity leave was articulated for educated, skilled,



formally employed, middle-class women. Female street vendors cannot relate to equal pay or maternity leave 'gains' because they are self-employed.

They need to work until their due dates, in order to earn enough to buy clothing for their new baby and feed their families. According to interviews conducted in Harare, maternity leave cannot be considered a 'gain' since, for these women, it is a period of 'loss' of income. So, how can the feminist gains of maternity leave be made relevant to street vendors, given that maternity leave is an important women's labour right and an aspect of the feminist principle of self-care? Adding to the challenges, female street vendors face constraints to balance work and childcare. Regardless of hearing or speech impairments, single or married street vendors almost always return to work "immediately after giving birth...". In February 2025, for example, a young fruit and vegetable vendor, in Harare, returned to work two weeks after giving birth, with her baby strapped to her back. This has an impact on the general well-being of babies, toddlers and mothers. Mothers combine domestic work, self-care, childcare, running their businesses, liaising with the police and dealing with fellow vendors. Unlike middle-class working women, the pressure on street vendors goes beyond the feminist notion of the "double day", where a woman goes to work but, unlike men, also comes home to domestic chores. Consequently, we found female street vendors to be more vulnerable to time poverty than formally employed middle-class women. Their domestic and productive work are not separate, as younger vendors of childbearing age bring their children to work.

In addition, the limited knowledge of feminism and feminist work among street vendors highlights the serious divide between feminists in the mainstream and female street vendors. The majority of female street vendors do not really understand what feminism or feminist work is, or who feminists are, regardless of age, ability, education or trade. A fruit and vegetable vendor in Harare revealed this disconnect, saying: 'Feminists are women who talk to the government to allow highly educated women to be in

parliament or to work in industries alongside men. I have never seen these women. They are not street vendors. We are illegal and not wanted here, so feminists don't come to us.'

Hence, upon a short, but concise explanation of what feminism is about, we asked the street vendors whether they considered their concerns to be feminist concerns. Three distinct reactions emerged. One category outright declined, another was half-hearted, and the last category conceded connections between feminist demands and their concerns. The category of those who declined and those who were uncertain constituted a majority. The responses ranged from agreement with a Harare vendor who claimed, "We have nothing in common with the feminists you speak of. We just want to earn money to buy basic necessities without begging...", to a half-hearted response from another vendor who said, "I don't see our concerns as feminist concerns. No one here knows any feminists. But, as you say, if coming here to work is seen as our right by feminists, then maybe we relate. We just haven't heard or seen much of these feminists. Still, I don't know if we can really say we are feminists too, because we hear that feminists are not good women, and cannot be married." Among those who understood our explanation of feminism, the following response by a Harare vendor stood out; "if feminists had not been working on our behalf all along, we would be back in the rural areas by now...Yes, I see now that we can work here, feed and educate our children today because feminists fought for this. ...If the troubles we face today are also what feminists stand against, then we are one..."

Some of the above perspectives indicate that, while some women street vendors may recognise a connection between feminism and their work, others see no genuine link, while some see an uneasy connection. This emanates from various aspects, including patriarchal propaganda and distorted narratives proliferated through social media and political discourse. These narratives often present feminism as culturally bad, portraying it as elitist and Western. This reinforces scepticism and creates ideological distance between feminist movements and women lived experiences. Consequently, despite experiencing systemic gender-based





violence and economic exclusion, many street vendors do not identify with or feel represented by feminist work. Most people do not know enough about feminism to see the connection with their everyday struggles. Feminism is rarely mentioned in everyday conversations at home or on the streets, nor is it expressed in language that is easily understood or relevant to the local context. This lack of grassroots engagement partly stems from feminist movements' failure to translate their gains into accessible, relatable strategies for women in the informal economy - women whose struggles are rarely reflected in legislative victories or mainstream feminist discourse.

Without subtracting from their efforts, it can be said that feminists have also been slow to apply postmodern feminist perspectives. According to these perspectives, women are differentiated by race, education, class, ethnicity, religion, ability/disability, age, marital status and sexual orientation, as well as other intersecting categories of domination. While some direct connections may exist, there is a general lack of engagement with grassroots women. Just as female street vendors do not "see" or "know" feminists, or are sceptical about them, mainstream feminists do not sufficiently engage with female street vendors, nor do they articulate demands coming directly from them.

We argue that mainstream feminism in Zimbabwe was built on a foundation that did not embrace an intersectional perspective. This leads to the homogenisation of women and the articulation of the worldview of dominant women, thereby maintaining pre-existing inequities. Feminists have yet to incorporate the matrix of domination<sup>xxi</sup>, whereby women do not experience gender inequities in the same way because their levels of vulnerability differ due to their diverse experiences stemming from their intersecting identities. Instead, middle-class feminists have adopted an elitist approach to agenda-setting and their work, thereby marginalising street vendors.

The elitism of the feminism that informs feminist work is confirmed by a quick profiling of top memberships in the organisations that drove the movement from the 1980s onwards. These organisations are dominated by educated women with the capacity to question patriarchy in ways informed by 'traditional'<sup>xxii</sup> feminist theoretical standpoints. Just as traditional feminism is marked by its dissonance from the experiences of African, Third World, black, and 'low' class women, the grounding of Zimbabwe's main-stream feminist work in elitist, educated, middle-class perspectives has unintentionally excluded women such as street vendors. However, as African, Black American and Latina women have developed their own feminist movements to articulate

experiences that were not captured by traditional Western feminist work, female street vendors are distancing their experiences from mainstream feminist work.

An examination of the structures regulating affiliation to most key organizations further support the existence of dissonances. These organisations emphasise academic qualifications, yet most female street vendors did not complete secondary education. Of those who did, very few passed five Ordinary Level subjects and, fewer progressed the level of advanced secondary education. Elderly vendors and those with hearing and speech impairments are even less educated than the others, and communication barriers further exclude the latter. Therefore, these affiliation requirements exclude female street vendors and their unique experiences. Literature which sees feminism in Zimbabwe as 'privatised', 'elitist' or the concern of 'educated middle-class women' articulates this reality<sup>xxiii</sup>.

## Bridging the gaps and mapping the way forward

### **1. Forge strategic alliances between feminist organisations and women informal traders, grounded on lived experiences.**

To promote gender equity and, ultimately, equality, feminist work must be redefined in consultation and collaboration with street vendors, through a rethinking driven by a more explicitly inclusive agenda informed by the concept of intersectionality. This will ensure the inclusion of street vendors of all ages, trades, levels of education, marital statuses and disabilities, marking a significant shift in feminist engagement informed by diversity.

### **2. Localize feminist principles - bodily autonomy, self-care, economic rights - for grassroots feminist knowledge dissemination.**

Feminist Knowledge should be made collectively accessible, so that street vendors not only learn about feminism but see themselves central to its meaning and power. Training peer educators within the informal economy to deliver feminist political education on street corners transforms these spaces into sites of learning and

empowerment. This is essential to counter anti-feminist cultural myths and propaganda. Grassroots feminist education must be rooted in direct engagement, on everyday struggles that women face. These will build trust and challenge the general myth that feminism is elitist, middle class and for rancorous single women. Grassroots dissemination involves simplifying and adapting feminist terms such as self-care, bodily autonomy and economic rights to the realities and vendors' levels of comprehension. For instance, self-care might be interpreted as access to toilets and clean water at vending sites, protection from harassment and freedom from the fear of random raids, distancing itself from individualistic and commercialised notions of self-care and centring it in structural and justice-oriented realities. Along the way, feminism must acknowledge and purposely centre vendors' survival strategies as legitimate forms of feminist resistance, so as to incorporate the resilience, leadership, and collective organizing that is already happening into the feminist agenda.

### **3. Advance gender-related legislation and create legal support networks.**

The persistent vulnerability of female informal traders stems from a lack of access to policy and legal information. A critical shift is needed in both narrative and policy - from the recognition of vendors as informal workers with rights to decriminalizing informal work and validating it as a legitimate form of livelihood therefore, addressing their need for greater protection alongside enhanced legal knowledge and support networks. While female vendors in cities such as Harare, Bulawayo, and Gweru have expressed a strong desire to learn about legislation that can protect them from extortion, theft of stock, and sexual

harassment, those in Bulawayo have specifically requested workshops to address their widespread lack of awareness regarding the procedures for obtaining legal vending licenses. This highlights the urgent need for safe learning hubs and dialogue spaces, as well as awareness materials that are accessible and equally written in local languages, in support to the development of legal literacy among women street vendors.

### **4. Gender Transformative Public Service Provision**

There is also a need for more vibrant and targeted advocacy for female street vendors' protection from police officers. In partnership with parliamentarians, the Gender Commission and relevant ministries (the Ministry of Women, Gender and Small and Medium Enterprises and the Ministry of Local Government), key feminist issues should be articulated. These include decent work in violence-free environments, bodily integrity and autonomy, and economic rights, as well as more toilets to promote vendors' water and sanitation need. Feminists and vendors must engage with municipalities concerning the designation of more legal vending spaces, such as those in Fourth Street, the Charge Office and the Market Square in Harare, the 6th Avenue Market in Bulawayo, and the Rank area in Gweru. These spaces will have hygienic latrines, taps and sinks for the use of all street vendors.

### **5. Financial reforms that redistribute resources and expand access to credit, banking, and collective financing for informal female workers.**

The financial sector must open to female informal workers, and feminist organisations must push for policy reforms to this end. They must advocate for the inclusion of vendors in national gender-responsive budgets and for the Women's Empowerment Bank to establish appropriate loan facilities with flexible requirements.

The female street vendors' clubs created to protect them against social problems, including low incomes, loss of goods and money extorted by the police would be a valuable platform to achieve this aim. Finding ways to support these



grassroots financial initiatives would be a great ‘marriage’ between the feminist movement’s work at the NGO level and in street vendors lived experiences.<sup>xxiv</sup>

## 6. Mobilize for more inclusive social protection programs centred on informal workers through sustained political advocacy

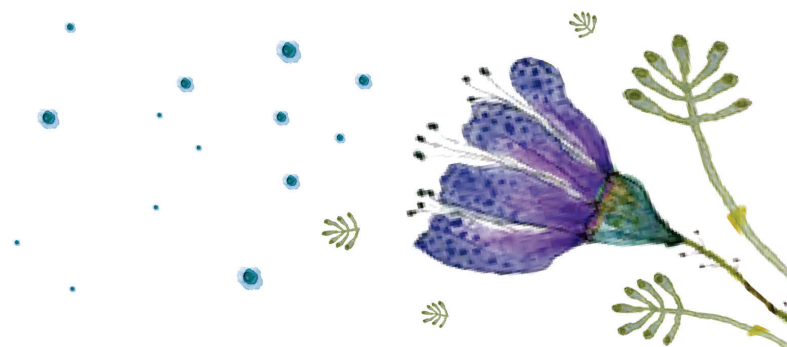
Dialogue should be established between street vendors and relevant ministries to reflect on how maternity leave, childcare and healthcare support can be made accessible to street vendors. These are important women’s labour rights and also relevant aspects of the feminist principle of self-care. The needs of women street vendors must be incorporated into the social protection advocacy agenda.

## 7. Address Gender-Based Violence (GBV) - including sextortion.

It is encouraged that there be explicit inclusion of sextortion in national anti-corruption and GBV legislation. Legal clarity is essential in order to differentiate sextortion from consensual sex and conventional bribery, and to reflect the coercion involved. Accessible, anonymous and hence safe gender-sensitive reporting mechanisms such as toll-free helplines, mobile-based reporting tools, or community ombudspersons are also needed so that women who do not report abuse due to fear of retaliation, stigma, or disbelief can then safely do so. Authorities should undergo regular, mandatory training to help them recognise, prevent and respond appropriately to GBV, including sextortion, on the streets. Perpetrators must be held accountable through transparent disciplinary systems in order to challenge patriarchal structures that normalise such GBV.

## 8. Gender-transformative Research on the Informal Sector

There is a significant lack of comprehensive, gender transformative and feminist data capturing the specific challenges, needs and contributions of female informal workers. Without this knowledge, feminist advocacy and government policy interventions risk being misaligned or ineffective. Including women in informal economies in the design and production of knowledge about their own lives validates their experiences, amplifies their voices and strengthens their capacity to demand justice and structural change.



## CONCLUSION

Although women dominate street vending in Zimbabwe’s informal sector, they continue to face entrenched gender inequities that constrain their livelihoods, despite their own active coping strategies. Feminist gains since the 1980s, such as legal protection from violence, mobility and the right to work and bodily autonomy, remain largely inaccessible to street vendors. Their struggles have been overlooked in favour of those of middle-class, formally employed women who are better positioned to claim such rights. Barriers faced by vendors include unequal earnings, a lack of maternity protection, an absence of child support systems and exclusion from credit facilities such as those offered by the Women’s Empowerment Bank. This discrepancy reveals how feminist engagement, when framed through elite and homogenising discourses, has often overlooked intersectional realities shaped by class, occupation and education. To bridge this gap, collaboration between feminists and vendors—especially through intersectional approaches—should highlight diverse lived experiences and prioritize clear legal frameworks against GBV, grounded in community-driven feminist messaging, inclusive financial policies, and investment in gender transformative research. Such measures are essential for advancing meaningful gender justice praxis in the informal economy.

# Bibliography

- i. (See note 2).
- ii. World Bank. 2023. Zimbabwe Gender Assessment. ©World Bank.
- iii. ILO (2017), Situational analysis of Women in the informal economy in Zimbabwe, [https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/@africa/@ro-abidjan/@sroharare/documents/publication/wcms\\_619740.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/@africa/@ro-abidjan/@sroharare/documents/publication/wcms_619740.pdf)
- iv. FUF correspondent(2023), accessed 13/03/25, <https://fuf.se/en/magasin/korrar/kvinnliga>
- v. (Labour Force and Child Labour Survey, 2014; World Bank, 2023)
- vi. UN Women, (2023 ), Assessing the State of the Women's Movement in Zimbabwe: An Abiding Solidarity? [https://africa.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/202310/state-of-the-womens-movement\\_in\\_zimbabwe](https://africa.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/202310/state-of-the-womens-movement_in_zimbabwe).
- vii. Chimbadzo refers to informal loans in which the lender imposes between 50 and 100% interest rates on the given loan amount. 9Rodgers, Y (2023), Time Poverty: Conceptualization, Gender Differences and Policy Implications, Social Philosophy and Policy, <https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?>
- viii. OECD/ILO (2019), Tackling Vulnerability in the Informal Economy, Development Centre Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/939b7bcd-en>.
- ix. Sunday News, 6 August 2023, "Municipal police vehicle crushes infant" <http://www.sundaynews.co.zw/ accessed March 13, 2025>
- x. New Zimbabwe. (2014). "Cops blamed for Masvingo Vendors' death." <http://www.newzimbabwe.com/news-14931>
- xi. 13 (CITE News 17th December, 2024)
- xii. Mlambo C. (2021), "Vendor rights and violence: Challenges faced by female vendors in Zimbabwe"
- xiii. Katsler M., FUF correspondent, Female Street Vendors Fight for their Place in Harare, [https://fuf.se/en/magasin/korrar/kvinnliga\\_gatuforsaljare-kampar-for-sin-plats-i-harare/](https://fuf.se/en/magasin/korrar/kvinnliga_gatuforsaljare-kampar-for-sin-plats-i-harare/) accessed 13/03/25 See also New Zimbabwe. (2014). "Cops blamed for Masvingo Vendors' death." <http://www.newzimbabwe.com/news-14931> Langa, V. (2014). Vendors recount hell at hands of council police. <https://www.newsday.co.zw/2014/08/09/vendors-recount-hell-hands-council-police/> Ncube, X. (2014), "No sex, no freedom", <http://www.thezimmail.co.zw/2014/07/16/no-sex-no-freedom/>
- xiv. FUF correspondent, accessed 13/03/25, <https://fuf.se/en/magasin/korrar/kvinnliga>
- xv. FUF correspondent, accessed 13/03/25, <https://fuf.se/en/magasin/korrar/kvinnliga>
- xvi. Cohen, M., Bhatt, M and Horn, P. (2000). Women Street Vendors: The Road to Recognition.
- xvii. <https://www.zimbabwesituation.com/news/cops-extorting-sex-from-vendors/>
- xviii. <https://voices.transparency.org/challenges-of-confronting-sextortion-in-zimbabwe-6836ce72479d>
- xix. Special thanks to Donald N. Tanhara (Speech and Hearing Impaired) and his friend Ruth Kasvosve (interpreter born to hearing and speech impaired parents) for the assistance with interviews of the hearing and speech impaired female vendors in Harare.
- xx. Essof S., (2013), The Zimbabwe Women's Movement, 1995-2000, Weaver Press, Zimbabwe
- xxi. Collins P. H., (2019), Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory, Patricia Hill Collins, Duke University Press, 2019
- xxii. Here, we refer to the earliest forms of feminist theories, that is, liberal, Marxist, Socialist and Radical feminism.
- xxiii. UN Women, (2023 ), Assessing the State of the Women's Movement in Zimbabwe: An Abiding Solidarity?- <https://africa.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/202310/state-of-the-womens-movementin-zimbabwe.pdf>
- xxiv. UN Women, (2023 ), Assessing the State of the Women's Movement in Zimbabwe: An Abiding Solidarity? [https://africa.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/202310/state-of-the-womens-movement\\_in\\_zimbabwe](https://africa.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/202310/state-of-the-womens-movement_in_zimbabwe).

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is the oldest political foundation in Germany. The foundation is named after Friedrich Ebert, the first democratically elected president of Germany.

The Gender Justice Competence Center (GJCC) Sub-Saharan Africa coordinates FES' work on gender justice in the region. Together with colleagues, feminists and partners in the region we create spaces for exchange and mutual learning and develop transformative strategies for a more gender just future.

The Anglican Relief and Development in Zimbabwe (ARDeZ) is the relief arm of of the Anglican Church in Zimbabwe. Its mandate is to improve the livelihood of the rural, urban and peri-urban populace especially the poor and oppressed in Zimbabwe.

Christian Aid exists to create a world where everyone can live a full life, free from poverty. It is a global movement of people, churches, and local organisations who passionately champion dignity, equality and justice worldwide.

## About the authors

**Ireen Mudeka** is currently a senior lecturer in the Department of Development Studies, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, at Midlands State University in Zimbabwe. Her research focuses on women's studies, feminism, gender justice and equality. She has worked on women's informal work, migration, liberation war contributions, post liberation war peace building roles, environmental justice as well as gender and social justice in humanitarian emergencies. She earned a BA Honours Degree in Economic History and a master's degree in African Economic History at the University of Zimbabwe. She also holds a PhD from the University of Minnesota, USA, with an African History Major and Development Studies Minor.

**Thando Gwinji** is a gender and inclusion specialist, and policy strategist committed to advancing the rights of women, girls, and marginalized communities in Zimbabwe and across Africa. She is the Founder and Managing Director of Youths for Innovation Trust, where she leads bold initiatives that amplify youth voices in governance, technology, and the arts, including the Loziba Movement which is a pioneering platform for young women in the creative sector. Her work bridges advocacy, research, and grassroots action, with a strong focus on leveraging ICTs for social change and inclusive development. Thando also chairs the Zimbabwe Young Feminist Movement, championing intersectional approaches to gender justice.

## About the Feminist Reflection and Action Group, Zimbabwe

The Feminist Reflection and Action Group, Zimbabwe brings together feminists from diverse backgrounds and areas of expertise to increase feminist intellectual discourse. Rooted in collective inquiry and solidarity, the group creates an alternative space for reflection, knowledge-sharing, and collaboration in pursuit of advancing feminist thought and action in the country. This reflective essay emerges from the work of the Feminist Reflection and Action Group and contributes to broader efforts to advance feminist analysis and practice. The group's activities are made possible through the support of the Anglican Relief Development in Zimbabwe, Christian Aid, and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Zimbabwe.